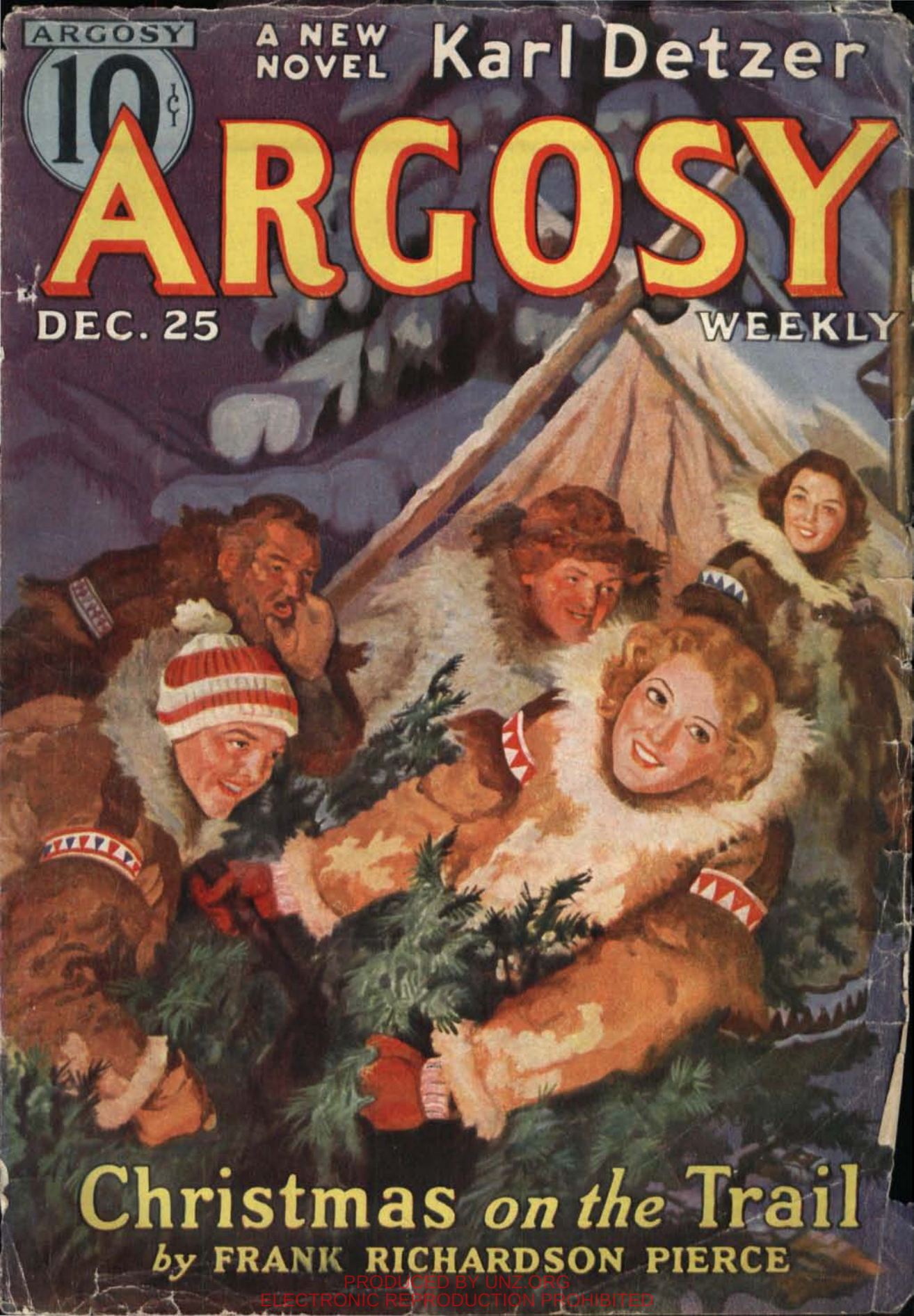

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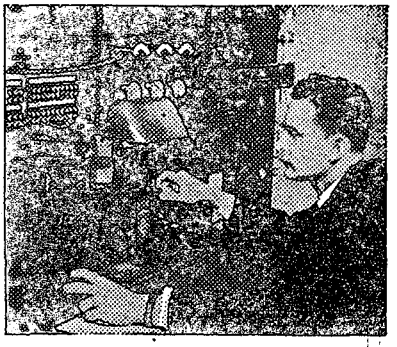

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Volume 278 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 25, 1937 Number 3

Christmas on the Trail—*Complete Novelet*.....Frank R. Pierce 4
A Klondike carol of No-Shirt's youth and a terrible and glorious Yuletide

Legends of the Legionaries—*Picture Feature*.....W. A. Windas 25
Lexicon of the Fighting-men

The World's Fair Mystery—*First of five parts*.....Karl Detzer 26
In the Hall of Science, among the marvels of the age, comes an age-old visitor—Death

Ribbon of Steel—*Complete Novelet*.....Philip Ketchum 42
Westward chugs the iron horse and westward rolls the battleground

A Whip for the Colonel—*Short Story*.....Alexander Key 60
What Ethan Allen did for Vermont, the little colonel did for Carolina

Tobacco Jamboree—*Short Story*.....Henry F. Church 73
The Katzenjammers of the State Police help a thief and catch a thief

Men of Daring—*True Story in Pictures*.....Stookie Allen 82
Major Frederick Lord—Ace of Fortune

Loot Below—*Third of five parts*.....Eustace L. Adams 84
The bridge of the Cruiser becomes a torture chamber

High Bid—*Short Story*.....Victor Kaufman 104
Every man has his price, even those in the Devil's pay

Genius Jones—*Fifth of six parts*.....Lester Dent 112
The glacier man is icy calm in Broadway's hottest spot

Gambler's Odds—*Short Story*.....T. T. Flynn 132
The house odds were enough for Dan Mulvaney, even when Cupid had the dice

Puzzles by Wire..... 72
Printing by Air.....Ralph Mitchell Benton 103
Argonotes..... 140
Looking Ahead!..... 143

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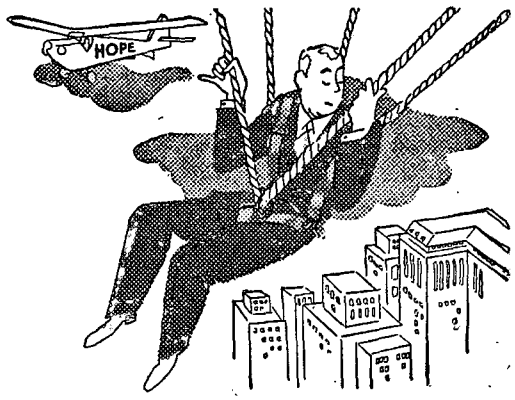

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Christmas on the Trail

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE
Author of "West to Siberia," "Sable," etc.

Complete Novelet

I

THIS was the Christmas there was more snow on the ground than Mrs. McGee's boy, No-Shirt, had ever seen before. And what do you suppose was in his stockin' when he woke up on Christmas morning? Nope, you're wrong. There weren't nothin' in his stockin' but his foot. But just the same, it was the best Christmas and the most important he ever had. And the Christmas gift he got that day lasted him all his life, and there ain't many gifts that'll stand the wear and tear of the years.

It was the Summer of 1897 the whole business started. A cuss named Carmack had struck gold on the Klondike and the whole country had gold fever bad. They claimed you could walk along and kick nuggets out with your feet. Because there weren't no banks in the country a man couldn't deposit his gold, they said, so the miners kept it in coal-oil cans in the corner of the tent or any place that was handy.

Every time I thought of gold I busted out in a rash. In them days I stood around six foot three inches, but I didn't weigh much over a hundred and thutty pounds. My ears stuck straight out from my head and I had the dumb, bewildered look of a half-grown turkey. If you don't know what I mean go out and look at a half-grown turkey, specially one that's heard a noise that's kinda scared it. I was a perfect example of the extent of a mother's love. Anybody but a mother would've took me out somewheres and drownded me.

My face was covered with fuzz and some claimed I was growin' thumbs on my feet and would prob'ly end up climbin' trees. Many's the time I've heard folks say, "I wonder what'll become of that McGee boy?" Nobody ever answered the question. The men just sucked their pipes and looked at the ground. The wimmin folks kinda twisted their aprons and said, "Tch! Tch! Tch! Poor Mrs. McGee."

When I sounds Ma out on the idear of goin' to the Klondike she breaks down and cries. "The Eskimos will kill and eat you," she sobs.

"You're thinkin' of the natives in the South Seas ain't you, Ma?" Pa says. "As I understand it, the Eskimos thrive on blubber and there ain't a ounce of fat on the boy. Besides, I've been lookin' on the map, and the Eskimos don't get that far South. It might make a man out of him. Still, what'll we use for money? Times are hard."

I scouted around town the next day tryin' to find somebody who'd grubstake me. Nobody would. Ma and Pa raised a few hundred dollars somehow. I changed it to money orders, sewed it inside of my shirt, and rode the rods to Seattle. It was cold and I liked to froze to death on them rods. But as it turned out I didn't know what cold was.

BUYIN' an outfit in Seattle was an education in them days. Most of the outfitters didn't know exactly

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Like Every Christmas Story, This Is a Sentimental One—but It's Also a Yarn of the Irrepressible No-Shirt McGee, Back in the Days When He Was a Be-shirted Kid

what'd be needed and the idear seemed to be to toss in anything that popped into the minds of the outfitter and customer. Danged few realized every ounce had to be packed over Chilkoot Pass on the backs of men. Bein' short of money, I had to figger on bare necessities, so I watched what an old desert rat was buyin'. Bacon, beans, flour, rice, sugar and plenty of dried fruit, besides a rifle and ca'tridges.

There was a half dozen kids like myself hangin' 'round and pretty soon we was herdin' together like a flock of sheep. You know it's kinda comfortin' when you've got a man pushin' again your shoulders on either side. And many's the lastin' pardnership that was formed in front of an outfitter's counter.

When I bought my stuff, the six other fellers said, "I'll have the same." Then we moseyed over to a corral where a man was sellin' horses and mules. That was right down my street, as the feller says, me bein' a country kid.

I picks out seven nags and asks him the price. Well sir, you could've

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knocked me over with a feather. I walks over and looks at each nag's hoofs. "Watcha lookin' at?" he asks. "I figgered you'd put gold-plated shoes on 'em at that price," I answers. Then I takes out a pocket knife, picks up a stick, and commences to whittle.

Maybe you don't know it, but instead of makin' deals over the lunch table like bankers do, hoss traders whittle. He gets him a stick, tests his knife blade with his thumb and starts whittlin'. We've got quite a pile of shavin's in front of us when we finally agrees on a price. There ain't nothin' left to do then, but buy steamer tickets. We figgered to travel steerage. I felt pretty good over the whole business. I'd still have fifty bucks left for spendin' money.

A block from the wharf where they sold the tickets I bumps into what looked like another piece of luck. There was a cuss with a little table. He had three halfs of walnut shells and a little pea. He'd put the pea under a shell and then would bet that you couldn't pick the shell the pea was under. I liked to died laughin' it was so easy. I felt sorry for the poor sucker.

A man steps up and bets twenty dollars, picks the shell, collects another twenty and walks away. As I said, I felt sorry for the sucker, but as long as he was givin' his money away I figgers I might as well have it as the next one. I watches carefully and saw the pea go under the right hand shell. Then quick as a flash I says, "It's under there." And I holds the shell so there couldn't be any funny business.

"How much will you bet?" he asks.

"A hundred and twenty-five I answers," and then lays down the what was left of them cashed money orders —six twenty-dollar gold pieces and a five.

He turns the shell over and the pea ain't there. It seemed like the whole bottom fell out of my stomach. I pokes the table to be sure the pea didn't fall through a hole or somethin' but the table was solid enough.

Just then a lady comes along. She had silk skirts that rustled and she smelled of perfume. Her waist was slim, but flared out pretty slick towards the shoulders. There was diamonds in her ears and she'd put paint on her lips. The fellers around nudges each other and snickers. I'd seen one that looked suthin' like her get off the train in our town.

Dad Wallace, the marshal, had run her in, which was what we called makin' a pinch in them days. That night Dad Wallace put her on the train for the city. And when I asked ma what she'd done you should've seen the look she give me. I got the idear it was suthin' only married folks and nurses talked about.

THIS lady looks at the shell game man and says, "Keno, you should be ashamed of yourself, robbing these boys. I am beginning to believe you are a tinhorn gambler at heart. Why don't you brace up and do something worthwhile—deal faro or something?"

Keno gets red in the face. "You quit knockin' me, Sue," he snarls, "you're mad because I'm gettin' a crack at the suckers before you do."

Two-Step Sue goes on to the ticket office and I hangs around, feelin' empty in the stomach. I'm dead broke. My outfit, and a mule named Felix I'd bought is already on its way to the wharf, but it don't look as if I'd go. The six kids who'd kinda throwed in with me ain't got enough between 'em for a ticket for me, either.

"Why don't you stowaway?"

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"Not a chance," says a cuss who hears the remark. "I tried it. They're guardin' every gangplank and men patrol the wharf to see nobody goes over the side. It's ninety days in jail if they catch you at it."

While life is lookin' darkest Two-Step Sue comes along. I suppose you're sayin' to yourself, she opens her bag and stakes me to a ticket. You're wrong. She smiles, friendly-like and says, "Sonny, I've been all over the West and have taken part in every big gold rush. This Klondike rush is going to be the toughest of them all. If between you . . ." She pauses and looks at the six other kids. "If between you, you can't think of some means of getting this youngster aboard, then you have neither the brains or resourcefulness to survive the trek over the Chilkoot and my advice is to scamper home to mother and ask her to take a good hitch on you with her apron string."

I had a kinda funny feelin' she was doin' us a good turn. If a man had said that we'd've got mad, but comin' from a woman it kinda prodded us. "She's right at that," says a feller named Joe Donner.

"She's smart," says Keno who happens to hear Joe's words. "She figgers may be you'll strike it. Feelin' kindly towards her, you'll give her a chance to pinch your pokes."

The boys' minds commences to work, but we're all green kids and as fast as we think of a plan we have to throw it away. Fin'ly I sees Felix with the nags they're gettin' ready to take aboard. He's a ex-army mule and only understands bad language, so you can't get much out of him when there's ladies around. I figgers they may have trouble gettin' him aboard and that gives me a swell idear.

I moseyed over to a vacant lot and finds a burr, and I puts said burr under Felix's tail just before it's his turn to go aboard. He takes a bite out of the first longshoreman that comes close to him, and lashes out with his heels. They attacks him from different angles, but it don't do no good. He raises seven kinds of hell.

"You'd better let me handle him," I says, "I'm his owner. I can get him aboard."

"If you don't, he don't go aboard," the boss longshoreman says. "I won't risk the lives and limbs of my men."

"Easy, Felix," I says, and lowers my voice and gives him a few choice Army mule-skinner terms. I rubs my hand around his rump, suddenly jerks up his tail and the burr drops out. The two of us do a waltz for a couple of minutes, durin' which a pile of freight gets knocked over, then I heads him towards the plank and he fairly shoots aboard. I gets him into a stall, rolls into the manger and covers up with hay.

AFTER awhile I goes up on deck and mingles with the steerage passengers. The rail is lined with men, three and four deep, and nobody's checked up, yet.

A chain closes off our part of the deck, but we can stand there and see the first-class passengers come aboard.

Two-Step Sue is standin' near the rail when the man named Jim Patty comes up the plank. He's carryin' a little girl in his arms. Behind him comes his wife who is followed by a little boy. I'd say the boy was about eight and the girl about three years old.

A steward shows 'em into a room and pretty soon the man comes out and Two-Step Sue says, "Taking the children over the trail?"

"Yes," Jim Patty answers.

"Christmas on the trail," Two-Step

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Sue says more to herself than to him.

About that time his wife comes to the door and sees him talkin' to Sue. She's madder'n a wet hen. "Jim," she says, "come away from *that* woman!"

Maybe I'm imaginin' things, but it seems like Two-Step Sue catches her breath kinda sharp like, but her expression don't change. She wears a poker face and it's cold and hard and don't tell nothin' that's goin' on inside. You wouldn't know if she was goin' to ease a knife between your ribs or give you a cup of coffee.

Then she buttons her coat around her and starts down the gangplank. Just as she reaches the wharf and turns towards the city, a brute of a man follows her, pushin' people aside in his hurry. He grabs her arm, when she's right below me, and his big fingers sink deep into the soft flesh. "Where're you goin', Sue?" he asks.

"To buy one or two things I suddenly remembered," she answers. She lifts her face to his and I can see her eyes are narrowed and full of green fire, like a cat's when the fur's rubbed the wrong way, or when a dog's cornered it.

"I thought may be you were goin' to run out on me," he says. "You know what'll happen if you ever do? You're a strange woman. I don't understand you."

"Perhaps, Jeff," she answers, "you've never really tried. Will you let go of me, or shall I make a scene? If I make a scene, it'll be one that you'll remember."

"I've your word that you won't miss the steamer?" he asks.

"You have. I wouldn't miss the steamer, now, for a lot of things," she says, "and you, and your need of me, is the least of them." Then she goes hurryin' up the wharf.

"Who's that buzzard?" I asks the old desert rat I'd seen buyin' the outfit.

"Him?" he answers. "Oh he's Flint Jefferson, and the Flint is a nickname. You can figger he earned it in a country where nicknames are given for special reasons. They claim if you have a magnifyin' glass you can find a drop of the milk of human kindness in his system. But it takes a right powerful glass. Two-Step Sue is his girl. She sings and dances in his saloons and dance halls. She's made him a hundred thousand dollars and all she's got out of it is a livin', some diamonds and her clothes. The fool woman is in love with the cuss."

"Don't waste any sympathy on Sue," another oldtimer says. "Nobody ever saw her shed a tear, except when she sings. If Flint is cashin' in on her, she's cashin' in on the lonesomeness of miners and kids on the frontier with her sobby songs."

I takes a look at Flint Jefferson. He's a good six feet, with fine shoulders and long straight legs. He's wearin' swell clothes, includin' a white vest dotted with little forget-me-nots. He has on a boiled shirt and there's diamonds in his cuff links. He sports a dark red tie with a diamond horseshoe pin square in the middle of it.

His hair and moustache was as black as Satan's heart and the devilish gleam in his dark eyes, whenever they lingered on a woman, brought blushes to their cheeks. A half dozen men seemed to kinda fawn around, and laughed whenever he said anything whether it was funny or not. Smoke from a four-bit cigar drifted amongst us steerage passengers and made us hunger for better things.

Three minutes before sailin' time a two horse cab gallops up and Two-Step Sue steps out. There's a fair-sized

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bundle in her arms, and she's carryin' a small, washboard pack board on top of the bundle. Flint nearly busts hisself to help her up the gangway, which same is a tipoff he was worried about her comin' back. He hefts the bundle and asks, "What's in it, Sue?"

"Something I feel I'm going to need," she answers.

"If it isn't goin' to be worth a dollar a pound in Dawson," he answers, "you'd better toss it overboard."

"It'll be worth a dollar a pound when I need it," she insists and I can see he's sore. She looks at him a minute, then adds, "I can pack it myself, if I have to."

Then she goes into her stateroom, which is built for two and is carryin' four, like all the others on the steamer. A few minutes later we pulls into the stream, swings and heads North while thousands on the wharf—mostly wives and children of stampeders—cheer their heads off. You'd have thought the whole business was a lark. It was for some; for others death, but for most it was an education in the toughest school in Hard Knocks University.

And Mrs. McGee's boy was one of 'em.

And he danged near flunked out.

II

IT BEGAN seven hours out of Seattle when the purser asked me about the painful matter of a ticket. There was some talk of throwin' me overboard and plenty of high words, but it ended up with me peelin' spuds. I never saw so many spuds in my life.

We drops anchor off Dyea early one morning and stares at a mountain range that leaps a mile straight up from icy waters. There was rows of tents and shacks on the beach. Yeah, and great heaps of freight. But it was them cold mountains and icy, windblown passes that made us feel queer in the stomach. Them mountains had a lot of us licked before we even left the ship. None of us could imagine anything like it.

The tide rose and fell around eighteen feet, which meant it went out a half mile. An easy way would've been to put the steamer on the beach at high tide and unload at low, but the skipper weren't takin' chances. The owners was urgin' him to hurry back to Seattle for another load.

Me and my outfit is dumped into a skiff and landed on the mud flats. I'm in the middle of packin' the stuff above high water mark when I see 'em drop Felix overboard. The mule swims to the beach and mires down. I get mired tryin' to help him out and when it looks as if both of us would get drowned, men come with ropes and snake us out.

Flint Jefferson hires Skookum Sam, a Indian, to help him pack over the Chilkoot Pass, and Sam's first job is to carry Two-Step Sue ashore. She's got her mystery pack in her arms and is laughin' and turnin' on a smile. May be it's a stage smile, I don't know.

Flint comes along behind her. He's wearin' hip boots and holdin' up his overcoat so it won't get muddy. "I'll lease a tent, Sue," he says, "and we'll put on a show or two while the boys are gettin' the pack train organized. We might as well pick up an honest dollar. Up here in the North I'm goin' to bill you as the Snow Thrush, Alaska's premier song bird."

She looks at him kinda funny. "Must we begin so soon, Jeff?" she asks, and it struck me she looked sick and tired under her paint. "There's a tough trail ahead, and we should rest, Jeff." It sounded like she was pleadin' with him, but her face didn't show it. It was set

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and cold, different than when she was smilin' at the crowd.

"I thought you was a trouper," he says in a mean, low voice. "If you ain't, then you might as well go back on the steamer. I always hated a clingin' vine."

"I'll be ready for the first show, Jeff," was all she said. She went into a little tent and I saw by the shadow against the tent wall she was wipin' her eyes. She was cryin'.

I figgers she must've been pretty much in love with the cuss. It was plain the thought of bein' sent back threw a scare into her. An hour later he puts up a big sign announcin' the show.

Me and the six kids stringin' together got ourselves organized by evenin'. Snow was flyin' and it was gettin' colder all the time. The wind moaned down through the Chilkoot, as if warnin' us to turn back. I guess all of us was lonesome and homesick because all of a sudden one of 'em says let's go to the show.

WE STANDS along the tent wall and waits and pretty soon Two-Step Sue comes out. There was a haze of smoke that kinda softened the hard lines of her face. And there was the smell of damp clothes and of men who had let their wet clothes dry on 'em day after day. The air was pretty heavy, but you hardly noticed it after she appears. And when she starts singin' your attention was all on her.

The first song was *Where Is My Wanderin' Boy?* All over the place you could hear the kids sniffle. Their jaws begun to sag and they looks mighty low. It seems like in them days the idear was to make you feel worse instead of better.

Then comes one that bowls over some of the married men. It went suthin' like this:

Down in my old cabin home.
There lies my sister and my brother.
There lies my wife, she was the joy
Of my life.
And the child in the grave
With its mother.

As they'd say in these days, the cuss's family was a complete write-off. Well, Two-Step Sue sings several others, includin' *Darlin' Nellie Gray,* then ends up with *Home Sweet Home.*

"Where's Jim Patty?" I asks one of the boys. "He was standin' here when she started singin'."

"He lit out for his fambly when she started singin' the *Old Cabin Home* song," he answers. "It's ballads like them that makes a man feel the worth of his home and fambly." And he rubs the fuzz on his face.

Later, outside of the tent I hears Flint Jefferson say to Sue, "You sure had 'em blubberin' t'night. Now get in there and dance with 'em while they're still feelin' the need of a woman in their lives."

So she goes in and dances at four bits a throw, and them dances ain't no long, dreamy affairs, either.

There was talk next mornin' that we was fools to try goin' over the Chilkoot until early Spring. A lot of Chechakos —that's what they called us tenderfeet —would be froze to death or caught in snow slides they says. Some claimed there weren't no wood beyond the summit and we'd freeze in our tents if not on the trail.

Us kids mills around like a lot of stampeded cattle wonderin' what to do. "I heard they're tryin' to scare us into stayin' all Winter so's the stores can do some business," one of the boys says.

About that time I spots Skookum Sam. He's got a two hundred pound pack on his back. Yeah, that's right. He took out two hundred pounds that day.

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I figgers if he's goin' to pack Flint Jefferson's outfit in, the rest of us can make it.

Skookum Sam's back before we're two days on the trail. I'll never forget the sight when we got into the mountains. There was new snow on dark green trees and a promise of more in the lead clouds tearin' theirselves to shreds on the grimmest mountain peaks you ever did see—reg'lar saw teeth.

There was Christmas crispness in the breeze and the packs was lightly covered with flakes. It made a man think of Santa Claus and Christmas all right, but there weren't no Christmas spirit and the things you see at such times, like smilin' shoppers with eager eyes and tired legs; and prodigal sons and daughters rushin' home from railroad stations to fambly gatherin's.

There was just the endless line of desperately tired men, a few wimmin and the Patty kids. The bulges you saw on the packs weren't toys Santa was goin' to put in stockin's hung by the chimney with care, either. It was stuff goin' to be worth at least a dollar a pound, freight charges alone, at Dawson.

PRETTY soon Two-Step Sue comes along. And she's got that mysterious pack on her back. Her jaw is set and she ain't sayin' a word, but it ain't hard to figger Flint's told her she's either got to tell him what's in the pack, or else lug it herself. And she's luggin' it.

Skookum Sam swings off the well-packed trail, overtakes Sue and stops her. "Lemme fix them pack straps so it'll ride better," he says. "It's cuttin' into yore shoulders now."

He fusses with the straps, shifts the load a little, then allows it to settle sorta gently again. "Is that better?" he asks.

"Yes. And thank you so much," she answers.

He kinda hesitates, then blurts, "It ain't none of my business, of course, but you don't know what's ahead. It's plenty tough. If I was you I'd fix things up with Flint so this pack could go on some of the horses."

"I'll manage," she answers. "You see, Sam, if I told Jeff . . . well, he would toss the pack into the nearest gulch."

Skookum Sam would've shrugged his shoulders as he started on, but a man can't do much shruggin' with a two hundred pound load.

There's a little packed place ahead in the snow, where a man can set down and let the snow hummock take the weight off'n his straps. I sinks down and am wonderin' if I'll ever get up again when Two-Step Sue shows up. She drops down beside me and smiles. She's kinda gray around the mouth and it makes her painted lips look like a smear. I know what the gray means—exhaustion.

I starts to pass the time of day, but the best I can do is to stutter and get red in the face. The other six boys trudge by. Our outfits are on our horses, but each man carries all he can stagger under.

Mrs. Patty comes along and she's tired too. Two-Step Sue moves over to give her room and Mrs. Patty starts to set down, then realizin' Sue's a dance-hall singer, she stumbles on a hundred yards and flops down in a drift. Sue catches her breath sharp like, then sighs, like a person who's been tired and discouraged as long as she can remember.

High above there's a growl, like the mountains are mad about suthin' or other. In the noise of men yellin' at pack animals, the breathin' of the ani-

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mals and the creak of saddle leather, hardly anybody notices it. "Sounds like thunder," I says to myself, knowin' that don't make much sense.

Ahead is the slowly movin' line. I can see Patty, with his little girl on his shoulders, wedged in between a lone line of pack mules. Beyond them aways is the little Patty boy. He's carryin' a pack on his frail shoulders, and he's proud and thrilled because he feels like he's a man. And at that he's better'n some men on the trail.

I got an idear he'd laugh if you talked about Santa Claus. But at night, when he's tired and his mother tucks him in bed, I'm bettin' he's a sleepy eight-year-old boy again. And he'll prob'ly think there might be somethin' in this Santa Claus legend.

Just as I'm standin' up and feelin' the pack straps cuttin' into my raw shoulders, the head packer of Flint Jefferson's train comes abreast. He stops sudden and takes a squint at the mountain high above us. "I don't like the looks of that," he said.

"You ain't thinkin' it's goin' to slip?" another asks. "Ain't no chance of a slide in this weather. It's too cold."

"Down here," the packer says, "yes. But they's a warm wind blowin' off of the Pacific and—" He broke off sudden, cups his hands to his mouth and bellers, "Snowslide! Snowslide!"

ALL ALONG the line you can see men beginnin' to run and yellin' "Snowslide!" Some try to yank their pack animals to safety, but the slide's comin' so fast they have to give up. I look ahead and see Felix. He's with the horses the rest of the boys bought. Three of the kids is tryin' to get the lead horse turned, but it's too scared.

At the same time I hear Mrs. Patty's scream and it'd make your blood run cold. Jim Patty's turned and is racin' for safety, with tons of snow runnin' like breakin' surf behind him. It's makin' three yards to his one because he's got the little girl on his shoulders and some of the snow he's wallowin' through is hip deep. There's a little ridge he's headin' for and it looks as if he'd make it. Then suddenly the snow heaves out, like a snake dartin' its tongue. Patty lifts the little girl high over his head then he throws her.

He must've had superhuman stren'th because a split second before the slide hits him the girl lands in a snowbank on the ridge. He's blotted out instant and the snow keeps pilin' up until it almost reaches the girl, then it stops. But it's a wide slide and all along the trail you can hear its thunder broken by the screams of men and horses.

There's suthin' about a horse's scream a man remembers. I can hear it even to this day. Scream after scream ends in a smothered, sorta muffled sound. There's a kinda stunned silence, except for the growlin' in the mountains, then the yells of men all givin' orders at once.

In the voice of each you can catch a note of relief. They're sorry others have been caught, but they're tickled to death to be alive. And don't think Mrs. McGee's boy was standin' around watchin' all this. He was runnin' for his life, and was half draggin' a lady through the drifts. Her name was Two-Step Sue.

"Our outfit's gone," one of the boys yells in my ear, "it's covered with tons of snow."

I nods, and the next minute wonders why I didn't start bellyachin' over the loss. I suppose it was because too many important things needed to be done. Little May Patty was sayin', "Where's my Daddy? My Daddy's gone."

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"We'll find him, dear," Two-Step Sue answers. "Don't cry. Be a big, brave girl." With that she drops to her knees and starts diggin' with both hands. The rest of us gives her a hand and pretty soon Patty's drug out, gaspin'. He's got a bad cut on the head and he's havin' a fit. Convulsion from the head blow was what the doctor called it later on. His face was purple and Sue shifts her body so the little girl won't see what's happened. Mrs. Patty comes up, pantin' and sobbin'. As soon as she sees May's all right she drops down beside her husband. She thinks he's dyin' and cries out just once. It's a cry that makes your nerves feel somebody's drug a file over 'em.

"Shhh!" Two-Step Sue whispers, "you mustn't let your little daughter hear."

There wasn't any time to spend on Jim Patty just then. Men were sayin' that a hundred men and as many horses had been caught in the slide. Every second counted. You should've seen 'em. Men, faces as white as snow, tearin' away at the slide hopin' to get a son or a brother out before it was too late. Other men, snarlin' and cursin' as they tore at the snow. You'd have thought the snow was livin'—suthin' they could take revenge on.

Ray Patty, the eight-year-old boy, was diggin' and blubberin' by hisself. He said his folks were all under the slide. I had to tear him away by main stren'th and show him his Ma and sister before he'd quit.

III

HOURS LATER suthin' like order was restored. Pardners checked on pardners and it was decided only a few was missin', and they was so deep under snow their remains wouldn't be found until the followin' Spring. Most of the men had run for it when they saw they couldn't get their pack animals out in time.

All I had was the clothes on my back and what was in a small pack. I got to thinkin' back and cussed the day I let Keno take my money in a shell game. The other boys came up and we stood around in a circle, with our jaws hangin' down. We didn't know it, but right then the seven of us was at the crossroads of our lives. If we let the slide lick us, we'd go right along lettin' hard luck lick us. Suthin' inside said, "You didn't let lack of a steamer ticket stop you from goin' North, McGee. You ain't goin' to lay down now are you?"

And another voice inside answers, "You're damned tootin' I'm goin' to lay down now. Only a fool don't know when he's licked. You ain't got no money to buy another outfit, and yours is buried under tons of snow. Also, it's almost Christmas, and while you're cold and busted, the smart folks who stayed at home will be lookin' into their stockin's and eatin' Christmas dinner."

When I lifts my eyes Two-Step Sue is watchin' me. "Are you licked, son?" she asks.

"I guess I am," I answers. "You know what's ahead?"

She nods. Ahead there was a place called the "Scales" where pack animals turn back and men pack every pound of their outfit up sixteen hundred steps cut in the ice. Beyond that there's a windswept summit with the flags of two nations flutterin' in the icy blast from the Yukon Country.

Unless a man had a ton of grub with him, or money to buy it at Dawson prices, he was turned back. Sure, I knowed what was ahead, but I'm bettin' Sue didn't or she wouldn't've looked

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at me like that. She just thought she knowed. But I was wrong. She told me. "And beyond that, sonny, are the gold fields, but they're only a tank station. Beyond is your whole life. Are you turnin' back now?"

"I dunno," I answers, "I'll talk it over with the boys." Then she walks over to where the Pattons are huddled. But before she can reach 'em Flint Jefferson grabs her arm.

"We're lucky, Sue," he says, "never lost a pound of our outfit. My head packer saw the slide comin' and stopped. Well, we've done all we can here. Might as well get movin'."

"I am staying awhile, Jeff," she answers. "There's plenty to be done. There's Mrs. Patty, with an injured husband and two children. She is bewildered. This is all new to her. It's not new to us, Jeff. The snow is new, perhaps, but the confusion of the stampede is an old story. They need us."

"You ain't goin' soft in your old age are you?" he asks, givin' her a queer look. "Naw, that can't be," I hears him add in a low tone. "In five years on the frontier I've never seen her go soft yet."

"I'm just as hard and just as soft as I was the day you met me," she answers, "the frontier hasn't changed me. My character was formed before I came West." Then she starts towards the Pattys.

"Just a minute," he says sharp-like, "every day you hang around here will cost us money."

She started to say suthin' then changed her mind. After awhile she says, "It might be a good investment, Jeff, if we bucked up kids like McGee and his friends. If they go on, they'll be good customers...."

"There'll be plenty of suckers in Dawson," he answers. "Listen, we're goin' to talk turkey. Either you come now, or you go back."

I'd heard him make that threat once before. She'd gone white, then give in. She went white this time, but she didn't give in. "All right," she answers, "unpack my things and we'll split."

"Your things?" His voice was so hard I wanted to kill him. "I bought every stitch you're wearin'! You haven't got any things. Now maybe you'll listen to reason."

"Yes, Jeff," she says in a weary voice, "at least I'm listening to reason. We split." She looks down at her feet, and she's hardly breathin'. For a minute I thought Flint Jefferson was goin' to give in. May be he figgers it'd be bad to give in to a woman. Maybe he reasons if he does it once he'd be doin' it as long as he lives. Pretty soon he turns on his heel and goes back to the train. He yells at the head packer and the horses and mules commence to move—smashin' through the new snow, makin' a trail around the slide.

TWO-STEP SUE caches her mysterious pack in a stunted tree then goes over to the Pattys. Irene Patty's holdin' tight to her kids and watchin' Jim's slow return to consciousness. You can tell by her face she's afraid of busted bones, but she's more afraid of a busted spirit. Her husband was the kind a little thing can send to the top or the bottom of the heap. I'd seen him on the boat get excited over somebody's good luck, then go around with a long face because somebody else had had bad luck.

She looks up at Two-Step Sue, then looks down again. "You need bucking up," Sue says. "Can I help?"

"I'm afraid not, thank you," Irene Patty answers.

"I think I can," Sue argues. "I know

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men and what makes them work. Your Jim has always seen a pot of gold over the horizon." She didn't ask the question. She just states the fact. Irene Patty looks surprised, then nods her head.

"When Jim wanted to go on this stampede," she explains. "I told him we would take the children, because this was to be our last move. I had hopes the children would steady him and make him stay with it. But...we've lost everything."

"I've only the clothes I am standing in," Two-Step Sue says. "And I am not turning back."

Mrs. Patty gets red as a beet. "I can't dance and sing," she explains in a low voice.

"And I'll go on to Dawson with an outfit," Two-Step Sue tells her, "and I won't dance and sing, either. Use the brains and resources God gave you, Mrs. Patty." Then she adds, "I'm sorry. You're already burdened with grief. But don't you see, you can't turn back. None of us can turn back."

Jim Patty stirs for the first time, and opens his eyes. "Everything gone," he mutters. "Everything, except a few pounds of grub on Ray's shoulders. I had warning. Every hour or two we see men coming back. We should have known what was ahead. The trail is marked with newly made graves." His voice raises to a hysterical pitch. "My body isn't going to be a marker on the Dawson Trail. I'm going back."

"Listen to me," Two-Step Sue says sharply. "You're suffering from shock. You're not yourself. You've lost nothing, but a few hundred pounds of grub. You still got your wife and children, Patty. You could've lost them, you know."

Irene Patty stares at Sue in amazement, then she kinda smiles a little, as if nobody had ever talked like that to Jim. "I know all about you," Sue goes on, "always quitting. This time you're going on. You are going on to the Scales. And so are all of you, boys." She includes the seven of us. "There'll be no whining, either."

She grabs my shoulder. "Lead off," she orders. "You two," she adds, "help Jim Patty. And you carry the little girl."

Pretty soon she has us lined up and movin' towards the Scales. Jim Patty's like a drunk man—confused, mutterin' but doin' as he's told.

FROM the mess of sleds, freight, men, animals and tents at the Scales comes a stampeder who'd been a doctor. He takes one look at May Patty. "That child needs dry clothing, warmth and rest," he says, "and the man..." He scowls, as if wonderin' if he'd sized up the case right. "...the man is suffering from shock, possibly a brain concussion."

"He was carrying May," Irene Patty says, as if to head off any idea the doctor might have Jim was yellow, "and he was afraid she'd be killed. He didn't think about himself."

"Of course, of course," Doc says hurriedly. "There are people who may need me at the slide. I'll look at your husband on my way back. Which one of you men is in charge of this party?"

"She is," I says, pointin' to Two-Step Sue, "and she's the best damned man on the trail."

It's prob'ly the first time in my life I ever spoke right out in meetin' and I was surprised at myself, and kinda pleased, too. "Come with me, kid," Sue says. She leads the way to a big stampeder named Bullman. Bullman's relayin' a big outfit over the Chilkoot Pass and he's got a tent he sleeps in

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when at the foot of the Scales. It's ten by twelve feet in size, has a sheet iron Yukon Stove, a stack of provisions and beddin'. "Loan the Pattys your tent," she suggests, "until I can figure out some way of getting them onto their feet. It won't hurt you to sleep in the snow."

"Help yourself," he answers. "We don't sleep any way, except on our feet. And say, if you need any of the grub, just dip in." He gives her an awkward pat on the shoulder. "This stampedin' ain't all singin' and dancin' is it, Sue?"

"And I figured you weren't as tough as you were supposed to be," she said.

Ten minutes later she had May Patty in a tub of hot water, driving the chill from the little girl's body. After awhile she steps outside to give the family a little privacy. Some of the kids in my outfit has drug up a lot of wood and built a fire. We figger we'll have to sleep settin' up. I can hear little Ray Patty's voice. "We ain't going back are we, Ma?"

"Of course not, Ray," she answers, "we've turned back for the last time. If I could only sing or dance, I might make something as an entertainer, but I can't sing."

"You can too," Ray stoutly insists, "you sang me to sleep lots of times."

"I am afraid a voice pleasing to a little boy in his crib would find little favor among rough miners," she answers. It kinda got under my skin, a little boy not losin' his nerve that way. I can hear Mr. Patty's deep snores for a minute, then Ray starts talkin' again.

"The miners ain't rough, Ma," he argues, "one of 'em patted my head and said he had a little boy like me back home. He asked me if I expected Santa Claus and I told him there wasn't any Santa Claus. He said somebody had been stringin' me. He said there was a Santa Claus and for me to believe in him. He said Santa might miss me this year because I was only one little boy mixed up with thousands of men."

I notice Two-Step Sue is tense all over, and gettin' every word the kid is sayin'. "Go on, son," Mrs. Patty says. "Did you learn his name?"

"The men called him Moose because he's big and awkward," the boy continued. "He asked me if he could hold me on his lap for a little while Christmas morning and I said yes, and he turned his head away quick and said in a kind of choking voice, 'By gosh'. Then he rubs his eyes with his mitten and said the air was full of dust. It was kinda funny to see tears in Moose's eyes because he's mean lookin' and has black whiskers and swears all the time at the mules."

"I rather imagine Moose is a pretty fine father," Irene Patty says. "Now turn over and go to sleep."

IN A LITTLE while a miner tosses a sleepin' bag at Sue's feet. "You can use this," he says, "I'm packin' all night over the pass."

"Thank you, Curly," Sue says. And an hour later I finds Curly sound asleep in the open. He's sleepin' on boughs he's piled again' a rock, and a little fire's helpin' keep him warm.

Around midnight us seven kids sleep huddled together, like a flock of young roosters the old hen won't let snuggle under her wings any longer. The cold wakes us up and I starts thinkin' of home and Christmas. I feels pretty blue in about five minutes. Back home Christmastime meant more'n gifts and eatin' a big meal. It meant a gatherin' of the clan and expressions of mutual faith and love. It always seemed like grandma's rheumatism give her less trouble and grandpa's game leg lim-

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bered up and the knee didn't slip out of joint so often.

After that was all over it seemed like each of us has the world by the tail and a downhill pull. Golly Moses, I'm sure homesick. The cold and the wind moanin' down from the Chilkoot don't help none. I drifts off again and pretty soon I hears Ray sayin', "Ma, Pa's makin' funny noises and sister feels feverish."

A second later the sleepin' bag ten feet away stirs and out pops Two-Step Sue. She's in the tent before she's fully awake and I comes lumberin' along behind her. Jim Patty's whimperin' with fear and clutchin' his arms tight to his breast. His wife's shakin' him.

"Oh," he mutters, bewildered, "I thought I was in the slide again and May was slippin' from my arms."

"How do you feel?" Irene Patty asks.

"Nothing is real," he answers. "It's like...like...God help us all!" He talks like he's kinda out of his head. "Poor little May..." Then he drifts off into a troubled sleep. It looks to me like he's in bad shape.

Two-Step Sue is placin' a damp cloth on May's feverish head and is listenin' to her breathin'. I just squat there, tryin' to read Sue's set face and listenin' to the wind whip the tent walls. A pack train stops and a man says, "We might as well hole in for a day or so. They say it's blowin' like all Billy-be-damned at the Summit. Did you ever stop and think it's almost Christmas."

His pardner beats his arms back and forth again' his body to warm up. "What's Christmas?" he asks, then answers his own question. "I'll tell you, it's somethin' about home, kids and warmth. I'd give anything to see a woman's smile. I don't mean a stage smirk like Two-Step Sue's. She ain't a woman, she's a cold wax figure with a painted smile. I mean a real woman."

Sue winces. It strikes me life kicks her around a lot. "Plenty of poor devils turnin' back," he continues. "Sure they're quitters, blast their yellow hearts, but they're wise. Us? Sure, we're goin' on to Dawson. A man's got a right to bellyache, though. I'd give a twenty-dollar gold piece to hear a good woman sing a Christmas carol."

"What'd you give for a Christmas dinner?" another asks with grim humor.

"My chances of passin' through the pearly gates," the first says. "Hey, speakin' of the pearly gates, what's this comin'—ghost or a man?"

I HURRIES out of the tent and it sure looks like a ghost to me. Snow's stickin' to his whiskers and clothes and the parka hood's frozen to his face. "I'm a poor excuse of a man," he says, "or I'd have killed one of those blasted Mounties that meet you at the Summit. I gave him my name, Mart Denny, and he asks if I have a ton of grub with me. I had a thousand pounds and packed every ounce of it on my own back up sixteen hundred steps. I'm no Skookum Sam and it took me a hundred trips, or a hundred and sixty thousand steps which is blasted near twenty-five miles straight up. And don't forget I had to come down them steps, too. And then the blasted Mounty stops me. I argue until I'm black in the face and to every argument he says, 'Quite! Quite! But I cawn't permit you to pass, y'know.' I left my outfit up there. I'll sell it to the first sucker I can find."

"I'll take it," Two-Step Sue says. She pulls off a diamond ring. "This is worth seven hundred dollars. Is it a deal?"

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"An outfit up there is worth a dollar a pound," he answers, "but I'll take the ring. Knowing it came from you, I know it is a good diamond."

"We could buy an outfit, too, if we had diamond rings," one of the kids in my bunch whines.

"I don't want any more of that kind of talk," Sue says in a sharp voice. "I'm giving it to the Pattys. And if I can just put some fight and courage into Jim Patty he'll find ways of adding to the outfit until it's large enough to get by the Mounty. And the same goes for you. If you'll just pull yourselves together, you'll make it too if you've got the . . . guts."

We was shocked. Ladies—even painted ladies—didn't use such words—in them days.

"We're goin' back," the kid says. "This country's got us licked. It's a smart man who can look a proposition in the face and realize he is beaten. Only a bull-headed fool will keep butting his head against a stone wall."

"Are you going back, McGee?" Sue asks me.

"Well . . ." I falters.

"McGee, you were smart enough to find a way to get aboard the steamer," she interrupts, "I didn't think a little heap of snow would stop you."

With that she dives into the tent and puts another cold cloth on the little girl's head. "I've part of an outfit for you," she says to Jim Patty.

"You don't expect us to go ahead with a sick child do you?" Patty asks, shakin' his head dubiously.

"I'm expecting you to go ahead when the child is well," she answers. She brings her bag into the tent, tells Mrs. Patty to get some sleep and she'll keep an eye on things. I sat hunched near the Yukon stove, feedin' it fuel and keepin' warm.

I guess I must have dozed off for suddenly I hears May yell, "It's Santa Claus!" Her voice is full of delight. You know how little kids are when they're happy and surprised. I figgers she's out of her head, but when I looks at the tent door there's Bullman, covered with snow until he looks like Santa Claus.

"Sorry to wake you up, Sue," he says, "but it looks as if we'd have to have this tent to shelter our supplies at the Summit. Hell's poppin' up there. While you're getting dressed I'll find a place for you."

"Listen," Sue says, "I bought Mart Denny's outfit. It's at the Summit. I'll trade you for what you've got there."

"Hell, Sue," he snorts, "this here outfit totals a ton. And it's got a little of everything."

"Yes, Bullman," she argues, "but this outfit is at the bottom of the Summit. The one I bought from Denny is up there. Don't that add up, two and two is four?"

"It's a deal, Sue," he agrees. "You're still the best man on the trail." Then he's gone, leavin' Sue with feverish May, Mrs. Patty who is almost crazy with worry, and Jim Patty who's starin' at the top of the tent, with his vacant eyes.

IV

THE DOCTOR shows up late that afternoon. He'd had his hands full at the slide. While stampeders was buryin' the dead he patches up the injured and arranges for men to haul 'em back to Dyea on sleds. "And that's where this family had better go," he whispers to Sue. "Don't let the woman know, but if we can't arouse Patty we're going to have a mental case on our hands. I mean, he is slowly going insane. Shock is only part of it. He be-

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lieves the world is against him. He's admitting he's licked."

"I see," Sue says. "Mrs. Patty and Ray want to go on to Dawson. All right, the whole family will go."

There ain't much rest for any of us the next few days and Christmas is almost on us before we realizes it. "Tomorrow'll be Christmas," Ray says. "And Moose is comin'. He said he'd hold me on his lap and tell a story."

"We'll make it the best Christmas any of us ever had," Sue says. "Ray, you and Sister will hang up your stockings as usual. I am sure Santa Claus won't fail you."

"Golly, Aunt Sue," Ray says, "you think of everything."

"Aunt Sue?" she says quickly, and her voice sounds different. It's the first time the boy's called her that. She suddenly kisses him. "Sometimes I talk to the men, and these kids like a Dutch Uncle, but I'm always your Aunt Sue." Then she sends Mrs. Patty out for a walk and looks after May.

Most of the kids in my bunch is goin' around talkin' in whispers. May is out of her head and Santa Claus don't mean a thing to her now. I have pictures of us makin' another landmark on the trail Christmas day. It's funny how a man's imagination tortures him at a time like that.

The doctor showed up about noon and took Two-Step Sue outside. "There'll be a turn, one way or another," I hears him say, "tonight or tomorrow."

His voice was kind.

"I've been expecting something like that," Sue says. "Her mother has believed me when I told her May would come out of it all right. You know how it is, doctor. We believe the things we want to believe so easily."

"What for instance?" And I guess Doc figgers Sue ain't thinkin' altogether of May.

"A dance-hall girl can have her hopes," she says wearily. "I'll not call you, Doc, if I can manage."

As Doc goes away she turns on us kids. "Take a couple of sleds," she orders, "go down the trail until you can find a Christmas tree. Cut it and bring it here. Also bring all the dry wood you can find. Heavy stuff that will burn awhile."

"A Christmas tree?" Ray asks. You can't hide nothin' from a young boy.

"Yes," Sue answers. "And a live Santa Claus, too."

"And a treat?"

"Yes, a treat," Sue promises.

"Say, Aunt Sue, what's a mental case?" She almost loses here cold poker face, but the kid didn't see it. "I heard the doctor saying we'd have one if we weren't careful. Was he talking about Pa?"

"Good gracious no," Sue lies. "Now run along. I'm going to be terribly busy."

She goes in and there's Jim crouched in the corner with blankets about him and his eyes starin' at things, but not seein' 'em. He was crackin' and crackin' fast. I starts to beat it with the other kids, but Sue says to stay. "You're a big, strong kid," she says. "I may need you in case Patty grows violent. Just grab him, but don't hurt him."

LATE in the afternoon the kids get back with the tree. She tells 'em to set it up, and Nature starts decoratin' it with fresh snow. While they're workin' she tackles the problem of Ray's treat. "I wonder," she says, "how doughnuts would taste if made without fresh milk, eggs or butter?"

"Doughnuts!" I exclaims. "What's them?"

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"Don't be funny, McGee," she says sharply. She sets about makin' a batch and just about the time they're done Bullman pokes his head into the tent. "Sue," he says, "you're pinched for cruelty to animals. Ain't those doughnuts I smell?"

"Yes," she answers. "And I've tried 'em out on McGee here and he says they're good."

He looks disappointed, but he ain't a man you can keep down. "Hell," he says, "that isn't any test. A kid likes anything."

She hands him one on the end of a fork and he nibbles away, with the expression of a wine taster on his face. "Better'n a Christmas dinner back home," he says.

"Nonsense," she snaps, but I can see she's pleased.

"God's truth," he insists. "You expect a Christmas dinner, but you don't expect hot doughnuts on the trail. I'll give you a dollar any day in the week for two and a cup of coffee."

"You would?" she asks.

"Just try me," he answers. "The smell of 'em made me homesicker'n hell. Do you know what millions of wimmin' folks are doin' in the States right now. They're preparin' the Christmas dinner. They're fixin' the turkey, gettin' out the preserves and scrapin' the insides out of big, golden pun'kins. And. . . ."

"Don't, Bullman," she says, half serious, "or you'll have all of us crying."

A hard-lookin' customer shows up about that time. "Do I smell doughnuts?" he asks, "or is it this rifle whisky I've been drinkin'?"

Sue gives him one. He nibbles it and says, "Finer'n frog's hair. And while I'm here, can I help decorate that Christmas tree. I always helps the missus at home. She bawls me out because I ain't got the artistic touch, but we have lots of fun."

"Go ahead," she says.

"And don't forget to bawl me out," he adds. "It'll make me mighty happy."

As soon as Bullman has gone she begins yellin' orders at me. "I've got an idea," she says, "I'm going to carry it out. You've got to help. Rustle me plenty of dry wood, and a clean, five-gallon oil tin."

I hurries outside and there's the hard-lookin' customer cuttin' stars out of the only tin can in sight and hangin' 'em on the Christmas tree. A mile down the trail I finds another tin can. It takes a lot of scrubbin' and boilin' to get rid of the coaloil smell, but I manages it. In the meantime the other kids are gatherin' dry wood.

Back in the tent Two-Step Sue is makin' the damndest batch of doughnuts I ever did see. She takes the can, fills it with lard and bacon grease and when it's hot she starts fryin'. My job is to take care of the fried doughnuts, cache 'em away and not eat any.

I did the best I could.

She catches one of the boys loafin' and nails him. "Circulate up and down the trail," she orders, "and tell everyone Two-Step Sue is going to serve a Christmas dinner tomorrow afternoon for one dollar. And listen, each customer must bring his own coffee cup, sugar and spoon. There may be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth, but there will be no washing and wiping of dishes."

Ten minutes later she makes the tough customer happy by bawlin' him out the way he's decoratin' the Christmas tree. It gets dark mighty quick that season of the year and we workin' by candle light almost before we know it. We keeps at it till well after midnight,

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then Sue says, "McGee, go get that pack I cached in the tree."

"The one you had to carry on your back because Flint Jefferson was too cussed mean to..."

"That'll do, McGee," she says sharply. And I hops to obey. I remembers she got it after she saw the Patty kids come aboard the steamer and I begins to smell a rodent, as the feller says. She takes the pack from me, and says, "You can go to bed now. And you'd better take a doughnut along with you. You've been a good boy." You'd have thought I'd felt kinda silly, but there was suthin' about the way she says it....

RAY PATTY'S yelp wakes me up. "Santa Claus *was* here!" he says. "Sister, there's something in your stocking."

I looks at Ray's stockin' and sure enough it's filled. And just below there's a red, iron train. May's stockin' has a doll and there're some other things on the tent floor below it. Irene Patty looks surprised, and puzzled, as if she thought this Santa Claus business might be on the level. Her eyes lifted to Two-Step Sue's face and plainly asks a question. Sue just smiles, then her face sobers. Christmas don't mean a thing to May. She just lays there and her mother looks scared.

"Santa Claus came, darling," she says. "Don't you remember what Ray and mother told you about him? You are better today, aren't you?" Her voice is that of a person who is whistlin' in the dark.

Sue sends me on the run for the doctor. "If we could only arouse her," Doc says after an examination. "I was in hopes the Christmas stocking business would do it."

"Let's try something," Sue says. She goes to her pack, which is gettin' flat, and takes out a Santa Claus outfit.

"Jim acted as Santa Claus at home," Irene Patty says, with a catch in her voice. I looks at him. He don't look like a Santa Claus now. Either he's bughouse or a yellow quitter.

"Is it too much to hope that we can kill two birds with one stone?" Sue asks the Doc.

She hands me the Santa Claus suit and says, "McGee, do your best!" I slips outside and lines up some of the kids, then goes back into the tent and gets Patty. He comes along, grumblin' but not resistin', and we takes him to a nearby tent. Then I remembers there's a sleigh down the trail. A stampeder has a mule harnessed to it and I high-tails it down there. "If we could get a couple of caribou for reindeers," I says, "we could do this right."

"There's a pair of caribou horns hangin' in that tree," a stampeder says. "You might tie 'em to the mule's head and..."

I makes a bee line for the horns, which shows how much I don't know about mules. We lashes the mule to a scrub tree and tries to tie the horns to his head. He don't like the idear and makes such a fuss the tree comes up by the roots, so we have to give up the plan.

I hitches him to the sleigh and we starts up the trail. The kids are waitin' with Jim Patty. He's rigged out in the Santa Claus outfit which covers up everything but the beaten, foggy look in his eyes. He takes the lines and drives up in front of the tent. And by that time there're hundreds standin' around. The mule sees Santa Claus and don't believe in him. He starts kickin' the stuffin' out of things, but a half dozen of the boys restrains him by main strength.

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Jim Patty climbs from the sleigh and he moves like a wooden man. His wife steps up close and whispers, "Please Jim, find yourself. Don't give up. Be like the old Jim. You remember how you'd laugh, then cry out, 'Merry Christmas, folks!'"

"Merry Christmas, folks," he says, but there's no life in his voice. Sue had put the little girl's things into his pack, along with Ray's red train. Irene shoves him into the tent and he starts fillin' the stockin's, then she picks up the little girl.

"It's Santa Claus, darling," she says. And it's so still you can hear the noises inside your head. Plenty of tough customers don't even breathe. I see Moose standin' there, holdin' a little sled he'd made for Ray and he don't seem to know he's got it. Mrs. Patty shakes May a little, and the girl stares. Slowly her eyes change. That red suit and white whiskers has reached suthin' deep in the little kid and that suthin's respondin'. It's like a fire burnin' on damp wood—it's goin' to take a lot of fannin' before it'll crackle.

"Quick, Jim, the doll," Mrs. Patty whispers. Santa Claus turns slowly and puts the doll in the girl's arms, and about then the flame they're fannin' gives the first crackle. Ray helps out by yellin' about his train, as if he hadn't seen it early that mornin'.

Then Moose barges in. "Here's something Santa Claus lost off his sleigh," he says. He gives Ray the sled, finds a box, sets down and holds him in his lap. But it don't last long. "Somebody find a board so we can lay a train track and give this youngster a chance to run that train."

A FEW minutes later Moose has it runnin' fine and then Bullman comes up and gives him a boot in the stern. "Let the kid run it, you big stiff," he yells, "it ain't yours. All over the country big folks are wearin' out kids' toys, but it ain't goin' to happen on the Yukon Trail." He gets down on his knees and says, "Now, Ray, you spot the baggage car here, then you run up and make a flying switch and . . ."

My interest shifts to Two-Step Sue. She's watchin' the little girl's face. "Oh," May whispers. "Oh . . . a doll!" Then she hugs it close to her and smiles at her mother. All Irene Patty can do is to hold the little girl the way she's holdin' her doll.

Men begin to ask about the Christmas dinner and Sue lines us boys up as waiters and we hands out doughnuts and coffee at a dollar a throw. The business keeps up until there ain't a doughnut left and the coffee is weak as dish water. There's a heap of gold and silver in a dishpan that'll run several hundred dollars.

But there ain't any change in Jim Patty. He's still got that goofy look in his eyes—beaten, confused and foggy-like. Bullman and Moose comes up and Moose says, "We're a committee of two, Sue, askin' that you sing some Christmas songs. Come out by the tree."

The tree looks pretty slick, what with the tin things cut and hung on it and the bright balls and candles Sue had brung along in her pack. The wind's quit howling down the Chilkoot, but it's bitter cold and the snow is sparklin' with diamonds. Nearby the boys have built a roarin' fire.

"God rest you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay . . ." Sue starts singin' that. There ain't nothin' preachy about it—it's just straight talk from the shoulder put to music, tellin' us not to let the country lick us. She'd started

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with the clothes she stood in and a ring on her finger and now had an outfit and several hundred dollars. She could go on if she wanted to . . . over the Chilkoot and on to Dawson. But I had a hunch she wasn't goin'. Suthin' more'n the country was turnin' her back.

She takes a deep breath and lets us have that tried and true carol, *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.*

"One more," she says when she finishes that, "what will it be?"

There was a chorus of shouts.

It couldn't be anything but *Stille Nacht.* Her voice is sweet and clear, as if the cold air is doin' suthin' to it. Irene Patty is standin' close to her husband, whisperin' suthin' in his ear, but it don't change him any. "Everybody sing the chorus," Sue says. It was male voices that joined in, and they came in with a roar that must've started other slides. I hears Mrs. Patty say, "Sing, Jim."

He just stands there a second or two, then I can see him changin'. His lips move, and he's like a man who is wakin' up from a deep sleep. Pretty soon he joins in with a boomin' bass that pushes weaker voices out of the way.

He's got one arm around his wife and the other's holdin' May. Only Ray ain't there. Him and Moose is playin' with the train. Two-Step Sue gets down from the box she'd been standin' on, but somebody lifts her back up again. "You boys keep right along singing," she says, "I am terribly tired and must have a little rest."

They thanks her with a burst of cheers, and she slips away. The crowd goes on singin', but my eyes are on Two-Step Sue. I'm thinkin' it's a hell of a Christmas for her. She seems to be alone. The Pattys have got each other. I'm with six kids, and most of the miners have pardners, but Sue is a fifth wheel as you might say.

Mrs. Patty slips away from the crowd and overtakes Sue. "I can never thank you enough," she says, "you gave me help when I needed it most. We won't turn back. Even if the Chilkoot Pass is ahead of us we're over the grade."

"I know you are," Sue says. "And your man won't turn back again. I've seen them at the crossroads too many times on the frontier not to recognize the signs. I'll sell you the outfit for just what I paid for it. The money from the Christmas dinners will cover it nicely."

"But . . . I don't understand," Irene Patty says.

"Don't try to understand," Sue answers. "You see, I am going back. There is no gold on the Yukon for me. Stay here, sell coffee and doughnuts to the miners. There's plenty of time. The break-up is months ahead—next Spring—and by that time you should have enough in the old poke to see you through and set Jim up in business in Dawson. A good business you know is better than a gold mine, most of the time."

THAT finishes up the Pattys. As long as they lived they'd call this the best Christmas they'd ever had. And it just about finishes up Mrs. McGee's boy and his six friends, too. I was learnin' fast. I could read signs, too. We weren't quittin' now. Men can't turn back when the best man on the trail is a woman. Sure, we was busted, and our outfit was under tons of snow. But what the hell? They were payin' fifty and seventy-five cents a pound to pack stuff to the summit.

It wasn't far, only sixteen hundred steps cut in the ice, then some walkin'.

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All you had to have was a weak mind and a strong back. And we has 'em both. And that, as anybody will tell you, is all you need to develop into a first-rate miner.

Sue leaves Irene Patty and walks slowly away from the camp. I gets the idea she might do suthin' desperate and trails along. She don't notice me. Her eyes are lookin' down and she's walkin' mechanically. Pretty soon she stops and stares at the sky.

The air is clear and them stars are standin' out sharp, like they do in the high desert only they don't seem to be so big. The singin' comes steady. The boys are happy, and like as not will keep it up all night. I catches their words:

Silent night . . . holy night.
All is calm . . . all is bright.

"But it isn't," Sue suddenly cries. "All isn't calm. All isn't bright." Then she starts to cry, there by herself. . . .

It ain't right. It's a lousy Christmas for her. I'm only a green kid, but just the same I'm goin' to do suthin' about it. I'm goin' to remind her what she's give the Pattys, me and my friends and everybody within five miles of the Scales. I starts forward, then I stops. Flint Jefferson comes stalkin' through the snow like he's either mad as hell, or scared. I can't tell which.

"Sue!" he says in a low voice. "I've hunted all over for you. I was on the outskirts of the crowd, listenin' to the singin' when you disappeared."

"Jeff!" she says, then struggles to get control of herself. "I thought you would be at Lake Bennett by now."

"The outfit is there," he answers. "I came back. Damn it—I fell in love once. It turned out the worst way love can turn out—another man, and me a sucker exposed to public ridicule. I was doin' all right until I met you . . . you and your hard face, and coldness. I treated you meaner'n sin, hopin' you'd get enough of me and clear out. But you didn't. Well . . . on the boat comin' up, I knew I was losin' the fight . . . fallin' in love again. Or may be I'd better say, failin' to fall out of love with you. When the break came, I got tough with you, knowin' you'd flare up and quit. I went on, but you're in my blood I guess. Go on, laugh at a gambler fallin' honestly in love. Kick my heart from here to breakfast if you want to, I can't help it." He draws in a deep breath. "I know when I'm licked."

"Oh Jeff," she says. Then she catches her breath, and some of the catch is still in her voice when she says, "My Jeff. . . ."

The next second she's in his arms, laughin' and cryin' and he's tryin' to understand a woman he's knowed for years. "What a comedy, Jeff!" she sobs, "and what a tragedy—two hard boiled people, in love, but afraid of each other."

"If you ask me," I says to myself, "you're a couple of softies. And your hard shells are as thick as egg shells." Then suthin' gets into my eyes. Dust, I suppose. It's sure dusty in the North when there's plenty of snow on the ground. I starts to go, then stops. Flint Jefferson is talkin' again.

"I guess this is the end of Two-Step Sue," he says. "She wasn't fated to ever get over the Chilkoot Pass."

"Jeff," she says, scared, "what do you mean?"

"Hell," he explodes, "when we get to Dawson, you don't suppose I'm goin' to let my wife sing and dance for a lot of gawkin' miners do you?"

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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

· RICE at WEDDINGS ·

The custom of throwing rice at weddings originated when the great Danish soldier King Canute, greeting a young bridal couple on the seashore, removed one of his shoes to shake the sand out of it. "May you have as many children as there are grains of sand in my shoe," he said, by way of blessing. Rice now substitutes for sand, but the thought remains.

· PONY EXPRESS ·

Contrary to popular belief, the Pony Express was not originated in America, but in Asia, by the famous soldier Genghis Khan, to keep open his lines of communication.

· MARTINET ·

This term for anyone of extreme strictness, takes its name from Colonel Martinet of Louis XIV's army. He was a stickler for discipline.

· ROSTRUM ·

The modern speaker's pulpit received its name from the rams (rostrums) of ships captured by Roman soldiers. The politicians used them as address platforms.

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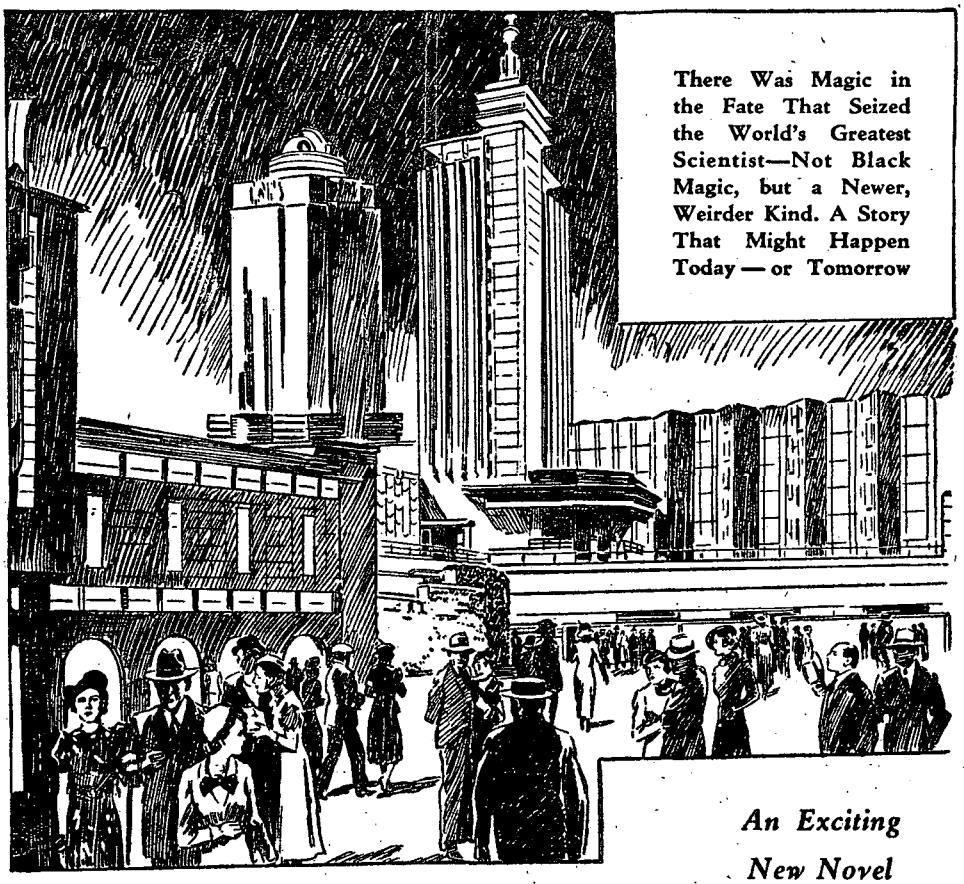

There Was Magic in the Fate That Seized the World's Greatest Scientist—Not Black Magic, but a Newer, Weirder Kind. A Story That Might Happen Today — or Tomorrow

An Exciting New Novel

The World's Fair Mystery

By KARL DETZER

Author of "Ladders Up," etc.

CHAPTER I

HEIGH HO, COME TO THE FAIR

FROM the very start, the public, particularly the press, insisted on calling these crimes a mystery. They were not, and to prove it I have decided to set down the facts. True, a series of events took place, including two murders, which at the time were not easily explained.

"Scientific murders," one newspaper called them, but they were not that. They were, instead, very unscientific. As to the word "mysterious," any scientist realizes that in even a difficult problem, if he possesses a group of known truths, each bearing on another, it is only a matter of effort and elimination to obtain the solution.

I went to the World's Fair for two reasons . . . first, because there was a great man lecturing there occasionally whom I wanted to have the honor of hearing, and second, because my daughter Mary insisted on our going.

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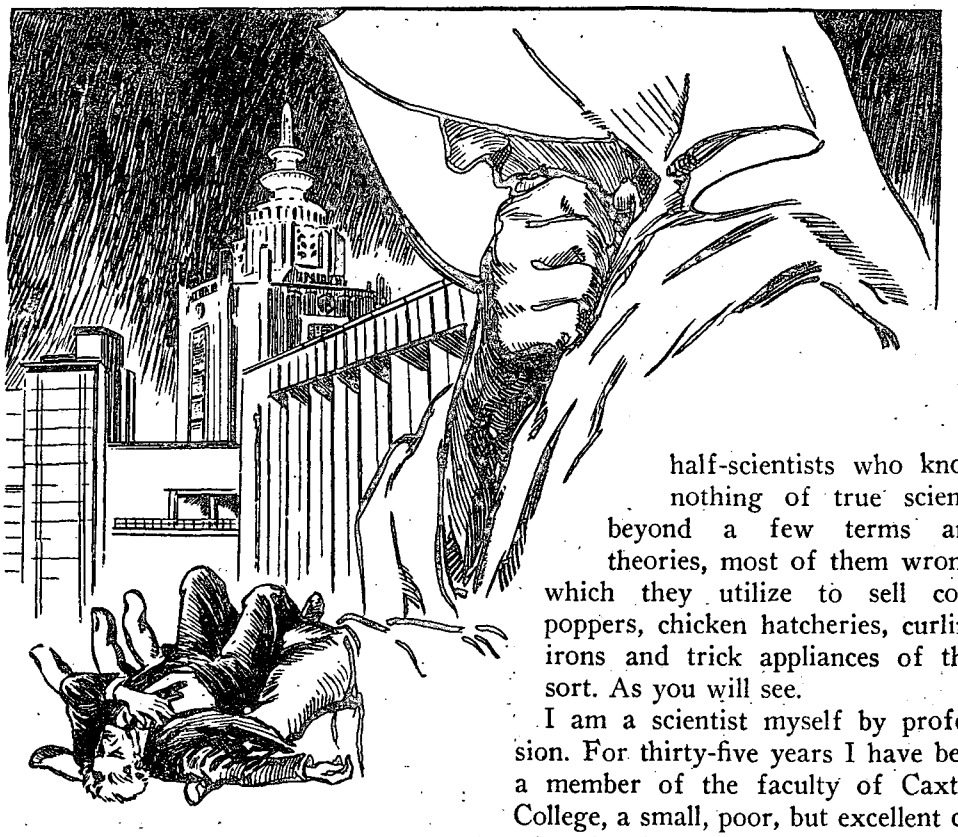

Mary is twenty-four now, and might be described as a "wow."

She has qualities of the tyrant, a keen native wit, and I am told that she is more than good looking. Certainly her conduct that frightening week at the fair was excellent, for she was one of the few persons involved who kept her head, and she with no experience at all of murder.

Mary says that it is temperamentally impossible for me to write an impartial account of all that happened those terrible days. As usual, I disagree with her. I do admit, however, that I became prejudiced, with excellent reasons I think, against all newspaper photographers, silly women, policemen, (except those who direct traffic) and a few other classes of persons.

Particularly do I object to those half-scientists who know nothing of true science beyond a few terms and theories, most of them wrong, which they utilize to sell corn poppers, chicken hatcheries, curling irons and trick appliances of that sort. As you will see.

I am a scientist myself by profession. For thirty-five years I have been a member of the faculty of Caxton College, a small, poor, but excellent co-educational school in northern New York. I am retired now, with the nominal title of Director of the Science Department, and most of my time I devote to research in basic science.

Sergeant Mulcahy of the city homicide squad had not the slightest idea what "basic science" meant, when I tried recently to talk to him about it. When I told him in plain English that basic science is pure science, he asked me (and I quote him direct): 'What the hell has pure science to do with murder in the Electrical building?"

TO say that I had not even known of the coming World's Fair is hardly true. I had read something about it, possibly in the scientific journals. However, I was deeply engaged at the moment in certain mathe-

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matical problems based on Dr. Einstein's new monograph on Physics and Reality, and I assure you—as I did the police when they questioned me—that I had no intention of dropping my work and running off to see any kind of exposition.

Unfortunately, as I have already pointed out, Mary has qualities of the tyrant.

I was arguing with her as usual, that Monday morning as we passed out through the iron gates of the big central station. I was insisting that we take the advice of the colored man in the red cap and employ a taxicab. Mary merely answered, "This gate out, Father," in a way she has, and what could I do but follow her?

To my surprise, a young man in a car awaited us at the curb, and as we approached, I saw to my further consternation that he was having some discussion with a policeman concerning his right to remain there. Looking back on my experiences of that week, it seems prophetic that a policeman should challenge us as soon as we got off the train.

The officer was less fierce, however, when he saw Mary. In fact he became almost civil, and the strange young man began to stow Mary's baggage into the rear of the machine, where, it seemed, I also was to sit.

"Not supposed to park here," the young man said, "so we'll rattle right out, and say hello on the way. How are you, Dr. Harrison?"

Who wouldn't be taken back by this familiar reception, since for the life of me I couldn't remember ever having seen this particular youth before?

"Oh, Punk," Mary was saying, "it's perfectly divine of you to meet us!"

Punk, was it? Now what did I know about Punk?

"You remember Punk, father," Mary told me, in a voice which meant that I should remember him, and not to admit it if I didn't.

"Sure he does. Couldn't help it, after the D's he gave me," the young man said. "Have you forgotten the banjo, doctor?"

When he mentioned the banjo, I did remember, and I looked at him again. It always surprises me after half a dozen years to see how these undergraduates mature, externally at least. I had always attributed this to marriage, but this young man, from his idiotic expression when he looked at my daughter, must still be a bachelor.

"Yes," I agreed. "I remember Punk. Your name was . . ."

"Stillwell," he supplied, smiling again foolishly at Mary.

"Arthur Stillwell," I told him, to prove I was not in my dotage.

He had not been particularly objectionable in school, as athletes go. Football, I believe his specialty was. In addition, this boy had found time to practice on the banjo on my porch, along with about twenty others. In spite of his references to the D's, he had been graduated.

"We'll have dinner at seven over on the fair grounds," he told Mary as we arrived at our hotel. "Take a cab to the Metropolitan Gate, and a bus from there to the Island. Ask any guide the way to the Electrical building. I'll be in my office. The rest of them will come there, too."

I had no idea who the "rest of them" were, and in fact I little cared. It nettled me to have these young persons make my plans without consulting me. I had plans of my own. I had come to hear a few good lectures, those of the great scientist, Alexander Ladd, first of all, and I intended to be about

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it without delay. I was thinking that these two might at least ask me if I wished dinner, when the elegant doorman slammed the car door, and Mary's friend drove rapidly away, still grinning.

THE lobby of the hotel was crowded. As we pushed through a wall of men, all talking loudly, I was startled to hear a woman's shrill voice call out, "Why, if it isn't Dr. Harrison!"

I felt a distinct shock. Not only Mr. Arthur Stillwell, but now a second stranger, must recognize us. The woman bore down rapidly upon us. There was no time even to ask Mary who she was. Before I could escape she had clutched my hand and I could only stare into her light gray eyes and say nothing.

"I'm Agatha Hawley!" she cried, in that strident, excited voice we soon were to recognize anywhere, any hour of the day or night. "You must remember my poor dear husband, Oliver Hawley?"

"To be sure," I said, with real embarrassment, for indeed I did remember Oliver Hawley, and very well. "I thought kindly of him, Mrs. Hawley," I hastened to add. "I even recall when you were married. You came back to commencement on your honeymoon."

"Ah, yes," she sighed, "that romantic honeymoon."

Mary shook hands with her. Mary, you see, has the faculty of getting on with all sorts of people.

They talked at once, and I assure you that Mrs. Hawley did not look, and certainly did not act, much older than my daughter. Her hair had not been red the other time I saw her, but now it was that reddish copper hue which Mary tells me is very popular. I did not object to it. Her face, however, for some ridiculous reason reminded me of a marshmallow.

Her diamond earrings, on pendants, jiggled when she talked, and I remembered; there had been diamonds in her ears during that romantic honeymoon, but surely these were larger.

Oliver Hawley, her husband, had been a Caxton man. Even in school he had experimented with tube lamps on the theory (extremely original for an undergraduate) that both the carbon arc and the filament in partial vacuum were makeshifts; that the ultimate use of electricity in lighting would be the so-called vapor method, then in its earliest form.

Of course a number of men at that time were making mercury vapor lamps. Hawley soon outdistanced them. He proved that a number of other vapors could be used in light tubes, patented the idea, sold his patents on a royalty basis to Sun Electric Corporation, and shortly was a wealthy man.

About six years ago, Hawley came back to Caxton for his twentieth class reunion, and brought his bride with him. She did not impress me greatly, except that I wondered, as I often am prone to, why men marry the women they do. Hawley, though, did impress me.

He took me aside, the day he arrived and told me of his plan.

"I've several millions idle, now, Professor," he said. "I'll build a modern science laboratory for Caxton."

Of course I was interested.

He had even chosen the site, it seemed—a knoll behind the English department building—and he explained that a suitable structure could be erected for two hundred thousand dollars. The rest of his gift, an amount he

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did not specify, would be for equipment.

Three weeks later Oliver Hawley was killed in an automobile accident, and Caxton did not get its laboratory. His wife, we heard, inherited his entire fortune, and began immediately a tour of Europe.

OF necessity these thoughts flashed through my memory, all the time I was observing the peculiar redness of her hair.

"I do hope," she said enthusiastically to me, "that I see a great deal of you, dear Professor. It always warms my heart to meet a friend of poor Oliver. Your daughter tells me you're doing the Fair! That's wonderful! I've been here months, ever since it opened, and I'm not half through yet!"

"Months?" I repeated. I had been hoping that Mary would be satisfied with three days.

"And I'll stay till it closes!" Mrs. Hawley cried. "There are so many frivolous things to do and see! You must go with me!"

I acknowledged her speech with a bow, which was really more than it was worth, and leaving Mary with her, I sought the desk and registered. When I returned, Mrs. Hawley had departed, and Mary explained that she had invited the woman to go with us to Arthur Stillwell's dinner party.

"It's a Caxton group, you know," Mary half apologized. "She sort of belongs, being a Caxton widow. Did you ever see such hair? I'm sure she'll be great fun."

It had never occurred to me that anyone with a voice as annoying as Mrs. Hawley's could be fun. Had I known then what I was to learn before the week was over, I should have taken my daughter by force, if necessary, and hurried back to the security of the campus.

I know now that our meeting with Mrs. Hawley was the first of the incidents which led directly to such horrible results. But I do not pretend that I felt any sense of foreboding. I realized only that there was a type of woman that set my teeth on edge, and I looked forward to the dinner with little appetite.

I did, however, ask Mary about young Arthur Stillwell. "What is he doing at this exposition?" I inquired.

"Why, everybody knows about Punk," Mary answered, with the emphasis young people use today to put elders in their place. "He's in charge of Lakelands Electric exhibit. The most interesting exhibit on the grounds! The papers are full of it!"

"Lakelands Electric?" I repeated. I was surprised naturally, for ignorant as I am of business, I know that any young man must prove himself conclusively to hold a position of importance with that great corporation.

"He's been with them ever since he left school," Mary went on. "Started at the bottom. Reading meters or washing bottles or something. He's a perfectly marvelous scientist."

"Oh?" I replied, but she paid no attention to the tone of my voice.

"He's on the radio all the time," she said. "Makes electricity interesting to people it ordinarily would bore. People like me. His exhibit here is called the Wonder Garden. He puts humor into electricity . . ."

"Humor?" I asked sharply. "In electrical science?" It always annoys me to see the facts of science dressed in gaudy clothing, simply to appeal to a buying public. I added ironically, "He must be remarkable!"

"Just wonderful," Mary answered,

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still missing my sarcasm. "We'll look at his exhibit before dinner. The Frank Fayettes are going, too.'"

I weighed this latest information carefully that evening while I dressed. For I remembered the Frank Fayettes distinctly. In fact I knew, although Mary did not, that I was responsible for Fayette being dismissed from Caxton. And his wife, Eloise Carsten had been her name, was the worst flirt who ever caused turmoil on a campus. There was even an instructor in the English department who . . . but let's not go into that.

Frank and Eloise had married in their junior year, and when Frank was dismissed, instead of leaving town, they started a ridiculous lunch room called the Campus Filling Station, where they kept the coffee in what looked like a gasoline pump.

They had succeeded in business. They now own a hundred or so lunch rooms, dotted all over the country, each with its gasoline coffee pump. Painted, also, on the outside of each is a picture of a slab of pie, and under it the words, "Yours for a bigger piece of cherry pie, Eloise and Frank."

With a sign like that staring me in the face at the corner of Oak and Hull streets every time I walk up town, how could I forget the Frank Fayettes?

CHAPTER II

SIDE-SHOW SCIENCE

AT half after five, with Mrs. Hawley, Mary and I started for the Exposition. Mrs. Hawley already had been over the grounds a hundred times. She proved to be one of those well-meaning persons who must forever halt you to point out another view and she also quoted statistics. Thus I knew, before I reached the island on which the Electrical Building stood, just how much floor space there was in the Hall of States, how many windows in this building and how few in that, how much the Federal Building cost, and so forth and so forth, all of which information I promptly forgot.

It was exactly six o'clock when we arrived at the Electrical Building, and because this was the scene of the first murder, which occurred, you understand, that very night, I must digress here to tell you something of the immediate geography.

A broad flight of steps led from a lagoon to the main entrance of the Electrical Building. If you halted at the top of these steps and looked back across the water to the mainland, you saw the Hall of Science, with its blue carillon thrust upward, scarcely an eighth of a mile away. The lagoon was spotted with craft of all descriptions, and although unable to see humor such as my daughter described in electricity, I was moved to a mild amusement now by the sight of Admiral Byrd's exploration ship, a Viking boat, a group of gondolas, a huddle of South Sea outriggers, a Japanese sampan, and a fleet of outboard speedboats, all resting like a happy family of internationalists upon this quiet water.

You must realize, for a proper understanding of the night's events, that the Electrical Building was one of three units in an architectural group. Here, under one long, beautiful roof, were Electricity, Communications, and Social Science. In shape this group resembled the numeral 5 tipped on its side, with the rounded bottom of that 5 the Electrical Building proper, a vast curving palace stretching around a circular garden. Touching this Electrical section on the north was the so-called Communications wing, housing

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exhibits of telephone, telegraph and radio. You saw here a long, narrow section, that formed on one side a boundary for a courtyard several acres in extent.

It is this courtyard to which I must refer repeatedly in this recital.

Stretching eastward from the north end of Communication wing, forming thus the north side of this court, was the Hall of Social Science; which, Mrs. Hawley remarked unjustly, contained everything from arrowheads to canned soup. In the center of the court, four triangular columns of masonry rose skyward, their walls painted in astounding hues of green, crimson, orange and blue; for no purpose that I could see, except to delight the eyes.

Of course we could observe all these details from no one place. Actually Agatha Hawley, Mary and I still stood on those wide white steps on the landward side of the Electrical Building. As I arrived the great plaster figures in a bas-relief guarding the main entrance had taken my attention, and I was listening, for once patiently, to Mrs. Hawley's explanation.

"Don't you see, man wresting energy from nature!"

I didn't see. But I refrained from saying so, and we passed into the building. There a broad stairway led downward. We halted on its first landing.

"Look at that ceiling!" Mrs. Hawley shouted in my ear.

I tipped back my head. Above us the entire roof appeared to be bathed in flame. The effect was startling, to say the least, and I gaped while Mrs. Hawley cried, "Lighting effect! Amusing, isn't it?" It was astounding, but hardly amusing, and I was about to say so when she went on, "It's really a monument to poor dear Oliver. You see, he invented the tube lights used in that display."

Now one doesn't argue with a widow about her husband's inventions, but modesty should have prevailed upon her to give several other scientists some of the credit. However, we continued with the crowd down the stairway to the immense hall. At the bottom, on the left, a sign announced the entrance to the Wonder Garden, and we halted.

It was here, several hours later, that the first murder occurred.

ABOUT us everywhere was the trademark of Lakelands Electric, the crimson L with a jeweled crown atop it that rivals the flamboyant sunburst advertising its competitor, Sun Electric. From the Great Hall, two doors led into the Wonder Garden of the Lakelands Electric. One, extremely narrow, was marked "Entrance," the other "Exit."

A tall young man in a purple uniform with a scarlet arrow in the sleeve barred this first door. Beyond him, as he halted us, I saw a room fitted with a stage and chairs.

On this stage, I presumed, young Mr. Stillwell performed his magic show, wherein, acording to Mary, he could put humor into electricity. And humor it must be, for certainly the atmosphere was that of a circus rather than a laboratory. Trick appliances of every sort filled the room. On the ceiling gigantic insulators conducted lengths of copper tubing to represent high-tension wires. At the right, just inside the entrance door, stood a photo-electric cell device.

This I observed while the uniformed man said politely, "The Garden is closed for the night, sir. Can you come back tomorrow?"

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"How ridiculous!" cried Mrs. Hawley.

"We're Mr. Stillwell's friends, here to meet him," Mary said.

The guide, for such the arrow proved him to be, smiled at Mary and said, "Oh, go right in then."

"Thank you, nice boy," Mary answered, and smiled back so frankly that I was astounded. It is a problem, I assure you, to bring up a motherless daughter.

"Isn't he good-looking?" she whispered.

"Oh, swe-e-et!" cried Mrs. Hawley.

I said nothing, only followed them through the narrow opening.

At the farther side, in a group by a door marked "Private," I recognized young Stillwell, the two Fayettes, and a fourth person whom I was delighted and astonished to see. This was Rodney Jurney, also a Caxton college man, and one of the most brilliant students who ever went through my department.

I assure you I had no difficulty in remembering his name. He had been a favorite of mine, and everyone knew of his success. When Oliver Hawley was with Sun Electric, he had entrusted much of his experimental work to young Jurney. He had a reputation for being stubborn in school — not a bad quality in a scientist. It made him fight for anything he wanted, even a theory in a laboratory.

Jurney shook hands cordially. He was here at the Fair for Sun Electric, he told me, but there was chance to say little more. Mrs. Hawley talked faster than ever, laughed oftener and for less reason. I confess that the woman aggravated me—though later I must be ashamed of that feeling!

"Can't start for dinner until Stillwell's boss gets here," Jurney finally made himself heard. "Professor Harrison, do you know Freeman Roelke of Lakelands Electric?"

As he mentioned the Lakelands company, I detected a touch of sarcasm in his voice, and it flashed over me, the oddity of it, that the two men, representing here at the World's Fair the two electrical concerns in closest rivalry, should come from the same small college. But I forgot the thought at once in Jurney's next words.

He said, "By the way, Dr. Ladd is with Roelke. Alexander P. Ladd."

"Alexander Ladd!" I exclaimed. "Not really? Coming here? To this exhibit, now? Why, I came to the Fair hoping to see him!"

"Good," Jurney said. "He could be here any minute."

NATURALLY I became excited. This was the great man I had hoped to hear lecture. All my life I had wanted to see him. He was doing tremendous things, too, at that moment, with his study of the infra-red radiation so recently discovered in the night sky, and its possible source in the cosmic ray. I, too, had been investigating this phenomenon, but who was I to mention my own research in the same breath with Alexander Ladd's?

"Is he . . . going to dinner with *us?*" I ventured.

Jurney laughed. "For shame. Ladd's not a Caxton college man. Could we associate with the likes of him?"

"Well," I said humbly, "I hope I have the honor of meeting him."

"Here he is now," Jurney said, and I swung around, staring.

I cannot tell you how majestically Dr. Ladd entered that room, his tall frame so straight, white hair standing up uncombed all over his great head. I remember that I was impressed even

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by the length of his white beard. For you must consider, it was no ordinary event for me, a mere professor in a small college, to be under the same roof with Alexander Ladd.

As everyone knows, he was one of the greatest scientists in the world. I became aware that Jurney was smiling at my excitement, but at that minute Stillwell introduced me.

"Oh, yes," the famous man nodded gravely. "Dr. Harrison, I remember you. I read your discussions on atomic energy in the journals."

At that, before I had recovered, Arthur Stillwell, with just as much respect as he had shown for Dr. Ladd, introduced Mr. Roelke.

I saw a bald person, possibly fifty years old, with a scrubbing-brush mustache and eyes so deeply sunk that at a distance I was reminded of a skull. Roelke. The name seemed familiar. Where had I heard it? Unsuccessfully I struggled to remember.

Not until later in the evening did I realize who Roelke was. In the field of business he ranked nearly as high as Dr. Ladd did in science. He was general manager of Lakelands Electric, Mary told me, and possessed a genius for selling fans and toasters and iceboxes.

"He's one of the richest men in . . ."

"In electricity, I suppose," I put in, and thought sadly, here is another man getting rich from some poor scientist's discoveries.

Clipped on his nose, Mr. Roelke wore a pince-nez, rimless, with a broad black ribbon. His cravat, the first of an astounding sequence of cravats, was that shade known, I believe, as orchid. A fresh white carnation bloomed on the lapel of his beautifully fitted gray coat and his patent leather shoes were spotless.

As quickly as I could, I turned again to Alexander Ladd.

Other men, professors who knew him, had mentioned his quiet humor. Also, it is honest to add, his temper, which was quick. In five minutes I was to witness it, but it made me admire his ability no less.

"I'm here as a walking exhibit for Lakelands," he explained. "This exposition strives to be dynamic. What is more dynamic than a human being?" I smiled, and he explained: "Lakelands is very generous to me. They give me my laboratory, provide me with money, with no thought of immediate return. So when they ask me to appear here, give a lecture or two, I come."

HE halted and looked at Roelke, who was talking to young Stillwell half way across the room. It happened that the pair stood beside a table with two glass jars of water on it, and between the jars, of all things, was a corn popper half full of popped corn. At every hand were exhibits, ranging from one of those new high-frequency furnaces—on reduced scale, of course—to an electric brooder and incubator full of newly hatched chicks.

"Ballyhoo! Dr. Ladd suddenly said. "And they call it science! They bring in a crowd of curious people, show them a simple device hooked up to a toy, young Stillwell gives a lecture in one syllable words full of misinformation, so far as they have any scientific value, and the populace goes away thinking it understands!"

Stillwell was approaching us. It was unavoidable that he overhear Dr. Ladd's words.

"What misinformation do you mean?" he asked. His voice was cold, certainly not respectful.

Dr. Ladd reacted unpleasantly. "The

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pap you feed the public!" A red spot burned in each cheek. His whole face reflected outraged feelings. I sympathized with him. It was the old, old struggle. Pure science versus the commercial application of it. Basic principles versus patented appliances. An endless conflict.

"You should stay and hear one of my lectures, Doctor," Stillwell countered. "If you did, you'd find—"

"Any time I want to hear you throw a lot of—"

"Glamor?" Stillwell offered.

"False glamor around a simple demonstration of the photo-electric cell. 'The electric eye'! Bah!"

He checked himself. In the quick silence that followed, Mrs. Hawley's voice came clearly from half-way down the room. She was talking to Eloise Fayette, meaning to whisper, of course, but her whisper was louder than most men's shouts.

"Ladd's a doddering old fool," she said, "just a plain old fool!"

You may imagine it was most embarrassing to all of us. But more so to her next morning when Detective Sergeant Mulcahy asked her bluntly what she had meant by it.

Jurney and Stillwell both tried quickly to make conversation.

"We'll not argue mass education, Dr. Ladd," Stillwell said. "I'm for it, you're against it, and there's no middle ground. In the meantime, sir, if you want to use my desk to do that writing you spoke of, you're welcome to it. You'll be here alone. I'll lock up."

"But how will I get out?" Dr. Ladd inquired.

"You can let yourself out, through either of those doors from the Garden into the Great Hall. They've ordinary night latches. To get out of the building, use the courtyard door nearest the foot of the Grand Staircase. It's self-latching, too."

His tone was chilly but courteous, and Dr. Ladd responded to it. The two walked into the private office together. Roelke excused himself then. He called to Stillwell that he might want him later in the evening, and started away, stopping only a moment to speak to Mrs. Fayette. I saw nothing secretive in their manner. Since they both laughed, I guessed they were talking of Mrs. Hawley's outburst.

We were to dine in a restaurant on the Island. Leaving Dr. Ladd in the lighted office, Stillwell set the night lock in the nearest door leading from the Garden into the Great Hall, and allowed us to pass out through the one marked "Exit."

"I've one more thing to do," he said then, and returned to the exhibit room. In the Hall, in a small circle, with Mrs. Hawley talking, we stood and waited.

Not long. Possibly in one minute, Mary cried, "Why, I left my purse on that corn popping machine," and she stepped back quickly after it.

AT the time, of course, I had no way of telling what transpired while she was in the exhibit room. Had it not been for later events, she probably never would have told me what she saw and heard. I realize now that her face was troubled when she did return to us, and for the purpose of the record, I must relate here what happened in the few seconds she was alone in that dark room.

Stillwell had not troubled to snap on the lights when he returned for his last-minute task. But as Mary reentered, the door to his office was open and it was brightly lighted. Dr. Ladd had pulled out a chair by Stillwell's desk, and stood with the knuckles of

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his left hand rapping nervously on the desk top.

Young Stillwell was facing him, not six feet away. Both were angry, Dr. Ladd was speaking, but too indistinctly for Mary to hear. She did notice, however, what a splendid figure the old gentleman made. He was seventy years old, but at the moment, Mary says, he looked ageless, whatever that may mean.

She picked up her purse and was returning to us when she heard Stillwell's voice. In passion, she admits.

"I've stood all I intend from you, Ladd," he dared say. Not "Dr. Ladd." Merely the surname.

"You've what?" the older man demanded.

"This new business . . . I'll not stand it. Damned if I will!"

Dr. Ladd laughed. "What will you do?" he asked. "Do you presume to change my opinion? Why, I believe you're an out-and-out faker!"

"I'll tell you what I'll do!" Stillwell snapped. "I'll stop you before you start!"

That was all Mary heard. Or wanted to hear. When she came out, hurriedly, Mrs. Hawley still was talking, and the cacophony of her voice swept every mind clear of other thought.

"There are dozens and *dozens* of rides," she was saying. "I *love* them! They take you away from . . . oh, from *life!* They do so stimulate you! There's one—the barrel rolls—well, I scream from the time I get on till I get off."

Which I could very well believe.

At that point, Stillwell emerged hurriedly and closed the second outer door after him. He said, "Let's go," and crossing the circular hall toward the X-ray exhibits, caught Mary's arm and began to talk to her gaily. "Goodnight, Dunnigan," he called cheerfully to the purple-jacketted guide who was still nearby. "Take care of the place."

Frank Fayette and I, an ill-teamed pair at best, found ourselves one on either side of Mrs. Hawley.

"Have you seen Frank's concession, Dr. Harrison?" she asked. "It's the most amusing restaurant. You must drop in . . ."

With her voice rattling in my ears, I was led away, unwillingly I confess, since I would much rather have remained, even silent, in the presence of Dr. Ladd. I often wonder what would have happened had I obeyed my impulse to say a pleasant good-night to this giddy young crowd and return to the Lakelands office.

There would have been no murder that particular night had I done so. But I went on, listening to the gabbling voice at my left and admiring the back of my daughter's very good-looking head as she and her young man led the way to dinner.

CHAPTER III

SETTING FOR TRAGEDY

AS I go through the newspaper clippings which Mary collected those days in the city, a feature which impresses me is the incongruity of the persons in our group that night at dinner.

A less congenial group by ordinary standards you would not see in a million miles of travel. We had nothing in common, save that we all were Caxton folk, except Mrs. Hawley. Of course, there was the fact that both Stillwell and Jurney were operating exhibits for electrical corporations. But didn't their two organizations fight one another on every front, in Wall Street, the laboratory, even in the retail shop? Too, they were unlike in

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temperament, Jurney the scholar and Stillwell the athlete.

Mary denies this last statement. She claims Rodney Jurney was no better student than Arthur Stillwell, that he merely got what he went after.

As for me, that night, I could not concur in the point of view of either one. For they both thought of science as a means of selling goods, Stillwell more so than Jurney I believed then, while I looked at science simply as a quest for knowledge.

And then there were the Fayettes, who did not fit any of us, and least of all each other. Frank Fayette could think and talk of nothing except his business. Work, with its resulting possessions, was a narcotic to him. As for his wife, maturity had even increased her good looks. But the years had made her no less flirtatious, and this fact irked Frank Fayette and he took no pains to hide it.

We dined well. I glanced down the table and thought, how pretty Mary looks, and what good lobster this is. I told my story about the sophomore who thought a cathode had something to do with the Catholic church. They laughed. They really were nice to an old man. But suddenly, while listening to Mrs. Hawley's eulogy of the cyclone roller-coaster, I noticed Fayette. His face was crimson and he was glaring down the table at his wife.

Eloise sat forward, hands under her good-looking chin, smiling straight across into Rodney Jurney's eyes. Jurney simply stared back admiringly.

"Well," Fayette asked his wife in a voice that broke through Mrs. Hawley's chatter, "what's so enthralling?"

Jurney took off the glasses that he wore always with cotton tabs back of the ears. He turned to Fayette with surprise. I recalled Rodney's trouble with his eyes, then. They were weak—the left one drooped noticeably—and whenever his glasses were off, tears came.

He said slowly, polishing the spectacles, "She was fascinated by my wit and beauty."

He spoke lightly, and Mrs. Hawley laughed, for Jurney was not handsome.

"She's my wife, Rodney, don't forget," Fayette retorted.

His words were uncalled for, but thanks to Jurney's quick wits, for he continued in a bantering tone, the trouble would have blown over then, had it not been for Arthur Stillwell. Intent on Mary, he was slow to understand what was occurring.

"I hope," he said, speaking between his teeth, "that you'll remember this is my party, Frank. I'd hate to have it spoiled by—"

He caught himself, and I saw the perspiration in little drops on the freckles across his nose.

That finished the incident, which would not be worth repeating, except for its bearing on what was to occur within two hours. Certainly some augury of those terrible crimes must have sat among us at the table. I was not forewarned, therefore not forearmed, or I should have watched each face more carefully and listened more attentively, even to Mrs. Hawley, poor soul.

We arose to leave, a little after eleven.

"NOW, my dear Dr. Harrison," Mrs. Hawley said to me, "tomorrow I'm going to take you in hand. Poor Oliver thought so much of you I'd just like to guide you around in his memory!"

I made no promise.

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"Besides," she went on, "there's a matter . . . oh, a very important matter I must talk to you about. I've just been waiting to see you about it."

What it was, she did not say, and I did not ask. Though I was to regret deeply within the week that I had not. She kissed Mary and Eloise both goodnight, even threatened to kiss Frank Fayette.

She was really a nuisance.

"Frank's always such a help to me," she said, and climbed into a chair car on her way to the gate, a taxicab, and the hotel. She waved gaily, idiotically, to us as she went off.

Fayette was bound for his own restaurant, at once. But first he insisted that his wife promise to join him there in half an hour, and in the meantime stay with Mary and me. He said goodnight, then, and with Jurney, Stillwell and the two girls, I started toward the Electrical Building.

It seems strange now that with tragedy only a short distance ahead of us that I could feel so carefree as we crossed those grounds. A spirit of carnival floated on the evening air, and the gaiety of the crowd was reflected in all of us. Everywhere about us were lights, white floodlights blazing against vivid colors, crimson panels, streaks of ultramarine, geometric patches of silver and black, giving to each vista an air of illusion. That, strange as it seems now, was to be the incongruous setting for our tragedy—a setting as typically, luridly, American as a burlesque show.

Jurney planned to leave us and go to his office, when we reached the Electrical Building, and Mary, who fell in beside me, said, 'You and Punk and Eloise and I are going on one of the Rides."

"Oh, no," I replied, "perhaps the rest of you are. But I'm not."

"We," Mary said. "Everyone has to do this one ride. It's a clear night. We can see the whole Fair from these towers, and there'll be nobody there to scream. Mrs. Hawley's planning to take us tomorrow. I'd rather go with Punk. This is my night out, father. I didn't come to the Fair just to go to bed."

No one who has not tried to outargue my daughter knows the exact meaning of the word futility. I do know the word.

Rodney Jurney's office was in the south end of the Electrical Building. We had halted to say goodnight to him, when a guide, recognizing Arthur Stillwell with us, approached.

"Dunnigan's hunting you, sir," he informed Stillwell. "He has a message from Mr. Roelke. You're to go to his hotel at once."

"Oh, pshaw!" Stillwell cried. "I'm sorry, Mary . . ."

"Punk!" Mary protested. "You can't leave me."

"I must go, if he sends for me." He turned to the guide. "Thanks. And tell me, is anyone in my office?"

"An old gentleman at your desk," the guard said.

"I might try phoning Roelke," Stillwell said.

"Oh, no," Mary refused, "go find him! We don't need another man. We've got father." She squeezed my arm.

"Roelke won't keep me long," Stillwell said. "He never does."

Jurney started on. "Good night," he said.

As he moved away, Eloise called after him, "Poor Rodney, can't ever play!"

"Too busy making that fortune," Mary added.

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They were teasing Jurney. I didn't know why.

"Wait till you see my girl!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"He wants to get married," Mary explained to me, "and won't."

"Won't?" I repeated.

"Not till he has a hundred thousand dollars."

"How ridiculous." Really, I was surprised at Jurney. "Such an amount is not necessary to marry," I said.

"Catch me waiting that long," Stillwell said. He looked at Mary. "All I'll need is a 'yes.'"

"Rodney'll get the money," Eloise predicted. "Watch him. He gets what he goes after."

"What's the girl like?" Mary wondered.

"He says she's wonderful," Eloise answered.

CHAPTER IV

A QUEST ENDED

As we neared Stillwell's office, at the opposite end of the building from Jurney's, Mary inquired, "We'll come to your office when we get down from the ride, Punk?"

"Oh, please," he said quickly. "The windows will be lighted. If I'm not back, stick around. Here—I'll give you my key."

"No, no," Mary said. "We'll wait outside. Who'd want to go indoors a night like this?"

It was only a step to the nearer tower of the foolish contraption on which Mary wished to ride. Some sort of aerial ferry, I saw it to be, with silver cars speeding back and forth on their high cables like so many flying fish.

At the base of the structure I discovered that Eloise Fayette had no intention of going to the top, but would wait for us on the ground. One of the few examples of good judgment I ever knew her to display.

Mary, in spite of her disappointment at Stillwell's not going, was having a lark with me; she thought that I, too, would refuse; I not only would ride, I decided, but would enjoy it.

Which rather surprised me.

We entered an elevator and proceeded to the top of a tower, which was only a step below the gates of heaven, and then walked out upon a glass-sided observation platform that overlooked the Fair.

Below us spread a brilliant spectacle, washed in illumination of every color. From this high perch our eyes could absorb the whole splendid panorama of buildings and courts, promenades and glistening lagoons. Only the sounds, the rhythms were missing. Very faintly, from the direction of the Hall of State, I heard snatches of band music, but that was all.

Mary pointed. "There's the Electrical Building."

It seemed almost directly beneath us. Searchlights circled its curving roof like a diamond necklace.

"There's Punk's office." Mary indicated a lighted section. "He's back," and then she added disappointedly, "or maybe it's still Dr. Ladd."

In spite of its immense sweep, the structure looked small from our height. The windows were plainly visible, making a lone solid white streak against the glow of reflected light upon the walls. There were few persons in the courtyard. The crowd, remaining on the grounds at this hour either was en route to the exits, or playing in the Midway, a mile to the south and west of us.

We stepped carefully around the

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tower. An announcer was pointing out the spots of interest to the thirty or more persons who had ridden up with us. We left them and returned to the south side, to look down again on the courtyard.

Its broad space was empty now, but the lights in the Lakeland office still glowed. While we watched I saw a tiny, oh very tiny, shadow come rapidly around the circular east side of the building, hesitate near the lighted windows, and then step backward, almost as if wishing to look in unobserved. I felt Mary's slim body shiver slightly as she leaned against me.

"He looks . . . dangerous," she said in my ear, and then laughed at herself. For from our height it was impossible to see a face, hardly possible to determine that this individual wore trousers instead of a skirt. Had the tower been even two hundred feet nearer the Electrical Building, we would not have known, looking down, whether it was man or woman there, so foreshortened the figure would have been.

In this position, however, we were sure it was a man. While we watched, he approached close to the windows, retired, again came near. After perhaps half a minute, he slipped away into shadows. In the same instant the lights flashed out.

"Oh, there go Punk's lights!" Mary cried disappointedly.

"It may be Dr. Ladd leaving," I suggested.

"If it's Punk, we don't want to miss him, father. Let's go down."

WE found Eloise at the bottom, talking to an Exposition guard, a tall man in crimson tunic and pith helmet.

"Enjoy going to heaven?" she asked.

I acknowledged truthfully that I had, but Mary was impatient.

"I think Punk's back," she said.

To reach the outside door of the Lakelands office, we had to pass around the east end of Social Science Hall, and then across the open space in front of Communications wing, a distance of some six hundred feet. Thus on three sides high walls isolated us, and upon the other the water spread black now, and secretive.

In the minutes while we were descending those flood lights which had glorified the painted pylons went off, in preparation for closing the grounds for the night. Except for the illuminated outer stairway of Social Science Hall and for a scattering of the so-called mushroom lights along the water, this court now was in darkness. To be sure, these stair lights cast some reflection, but this grew blurred as it stretched away to the other end of the court.

As we walked, hurrying to keep up with Mary, Eloise asked, "What's the rush, funny-face? He'll wait."

Mary continued to hurry. We turned to the right down the promenade that led between the darkened pylons and thence to the left again. As we did so, I noticed one of those resplendent guides standing at the top of the lighted stairway. He watched us apparently with curiosity, even came down a step as if to intercept us; then thinking better of it, returned to the top.

The office lights still were out, and the room beyond the eleven long windows—I since have counted them—remained dark. As we reached the building, we unconsciously reduced our stride.

"Punk isn't back," Mary said. "Why would old Roelke need him tonight of all nights?"

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"He'll come," Eloise assured her. "Sorry I can't wait with you, but I've a husband, you know, and he expects me, and when he expects. . . ." She and Mary both laughed.

Mary peered in through one of the windows, but she could see nothing. Then, for some reason she never could explain to me, she reached for the door knob; quickly drew back her hand.

"Why, father, this door's open," she called. "Look here."

Eloise came back, repeating, "Open?"

"Anything of value in there?" Mary asked.

"Oh, mercy, yes," Eloise answered. "If the door isn't locked, he must be nearby. All that valuable equipment is inside. He wouldn't leave it unprotected—the door open."

We stood in a half circle. The door swung on its hinges, not more than four or five inches open. Mary pulled on the knob.

Thus, with the door wide open, she became emboldened.

"He'll be here in a minute," she said confidently. "Let's go in, turn on some lights." But she halted on the threshold. "Father!" she cried. "That man—the one we saw looking in! Something's wrong! Oh, I'm sure that something has happened."

She leaned forward, trying to see the interior. Light from without cast only a dull illumination through the glass side. Where we stood, Eloise and I could see nothing, but Mary screamed.

I never have heard such terror in a voice.

I DRAGGED her, still crying, out to the deserted courtyard. Eloise screamed just once, as if in answer to Mary, then ran swiftly toward the center of the court.

"Guide!" she was calling. "Guide! Quick!"

I heard an answering shout, "Coming! Coming!"

It was a man's deep voice. The guide—the one we just had seen on the stair of Social Science Hall—dashed toward us.

"What's up, sir?" he cried. "What is it? Is the lady ill?"

Mary pointed excitedly toward the dark glass.

"In there!" she whispered. "There . . . oh, Punk! Quick!"

The guide snatched a flashlamp from his pocket and ran. Leaving Mary to Eloise, I followed him, excitement making me tremble in every limb.

The beam of the lamp pushed aggressively ahead. In the doorway it halted, then inch by inch brightened the office.

Mary cried, "By the desk!"

The flashlamp swung, hesitated, then became fixed. The guide took three swift steps.

"Good Lord!" I heard him say. The words came dry from his throat. He stood quite still.

I looked past him. On the floor in front of the desk sprawled a man. I remember distinctly what I saw in that first glance. The feet were toward me, and the soles of his shoes, toes up, lay close together. Then I saw a right hand outstretched. Could it possibly be young Stillwell? The guide was stepping forward cautiously. I followed. I, too, must have cried out.

The dead man—for I knew instinctively that he was dead—the dead man was Dr. Alexander Ladd. Blood spread over his shirt front and made a pool on the floor beside him.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Ribbon of Steel

A Complete Novelet of the Men Who Fought—and Died—to Bring Civilization to the Land that Lay West of the Rockies

By PHILIP KETCHUM
Author of "Main Line West," etc.

I

LEAN and hardened by two months in the wilderness, a fresh scar on the side of his head as a memento of a brush with hostile Indians which had cost the lives of two of his party, Stewart McCallum, surveyor for the Union Pacific, stood in John Brockway's tent office in the town at the head of the rails and listened to the older man's story of the road's progress.

Brockway was glum, worried. From Washington, trickling down to him through his superiors, had come rumors of dissatisfaction, of a possible Congressional investigation, of a move to withdraw the government subsidy without which the building of this first great transcontinental railroad would be impossible. More speed was essential. General Dodge insisted on it. Oakes Ames and Durant begged for it. Winter was closing in. Supplies were being held up somewhere in the East. The Indian was still a problem, and brawls between rival Irish gangs or fights in town were almost a daily occurrence.

Mostly during Brockway's talk Stewart McCallum was silent, but now and then he asked a question. For most of the two months while his party had steered its course through the mountains just ahead, he had been out of touch with things. It had been his hope that General Dodge would be here at the end of the rails when he arrived, but Dodge was somewhere in the East trying to explain the problems they faced and trying to speed up the supplies.

As Brockway finished his story, the screaming whistle of a locomotive sounded from up the tracks and a

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moment later McCallum could hear the shouts and cries of the returning laborers as they arrived back in camp. In another hour dinner would be ready and after that this town at the head of the tracks would swing into its usual mad hours of pleasure and excitement. McCallum knew that from past experience.

Walking over to the tent door he pushed it open and stared outside. Laborers from the train which had just arrived trooped past. Most of them were Irish, many of them had been soldiers. A goodly number carried rifles or wore gunbelts around their waists. They went to work armed, for trouble with the Indians was always a possibility.

At his shoulder, John Brockway said, "As fine a crew of workers as was ever assembled. Happy, carefree, strong, courageous, there's not a man there whose name shouldn't go down in history. They're winning a battle more glorious than Gettysburg and against greater odds. The future of a nation rides on their shoulders. These men are the real empire builders and probably they'll be forgotten."

McCallum nodded. His eyes caught sight of the short, stooped figure of a man passing the tent office and he said to Brockway, "There's Joe Sparling. I'll see you later," and stepping forward he overtook the little man and grasped him by the shoulder.

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SPARLING whirled around, stared at McCallum and then with a shout grabbed for McCallum's hand and started pumping it up and down. McCallum grinned. He had a deep affection for the little man, who in spite of his size was the section boss of as wild a crew of Irishmen as had ever been assembled.

Shooting questions at him, Sparling led the way on up the row of company tents and then between two of them to the street beyond where there was a long line of hastily constructed buildings and more tents. There McCallum paused, his eyes taking in the scene.

Sparling asked, "Well, what do you think of it, Mac?"

"What should I think?" McCallum shrugged.

The Irishman frowned. He said slowly: "Men call this town Balsum Springs. A week ago it was just a part of the barren prairie. In another week or two we'll knock off for a day, take down the tents an' shacks an' move on up the rails an' set up another town. When that happens there won't be anything to mark this spot but a few shacks too worthless to be pulled down, piles of refuse, rustin' tin cans, broken bottles, papers, an' maybe a water tank. Yes, Balsum Springs will go the way of Julesburg an' Willow Springs an' Sheridan an' Coyote. But right now, Mac, it's all those places rolled into one. It's bigger because we got more men workin' than we ever had before. An' it's worse because it's bigger."

McCallum was only half listening. His eyes moved up and down the street marking the signs of half a dozen saloons, of several optimistic land-speculators, of various stores; and here and there he noticed tents larger than the others, and knew that they were gambling tents. From the very first the town at the head of the rails had always been composed of two parts—one, company offices, company tents and company men; another, the parasites who flocked along to live on the fruits of the labor of others, gamblers, saloonkeepers, and inevitably a retinue of women usually attached to the saloons or the gambling tents.

"Pretty bad, huh?" he asked.

Sparling nodded. He said heavily. "Two of my boys were shot down last week in that place over there." He pointed to the left. "They accused a gambler of usin' a marked deck. 'N' they didn't get their guns out fast enough."

McCallum was looking down the street toward the tent Sparling had indicated. Men were already walking in and out of its doors. He said to Sparling. "Wasn't that Toomy who just went in there?"

"Probably," Sparling answered. "Let's go see."

They walked on down to the tent and passed inside. Dampened sawdust covered the ground, and two thirds of the space under the canvas top was taken up by tables with boxes for chairs. At one side there was a crude bar, near it a back entrance.

McCallum looked around for Toomy but didn't see him. He walked over to the bar, ordered a drink for himself and Sparling and, when they had been served, turned around to face the room. Two women had come in from the street and were standing together, talking, one with her back to them. McCallum glanced at them casually. Three men entered noisily, grabbed for the women and pulled one of them, who laughingly protested, toward the bar. The other woman turned around, and as she did so and as McCallum's eyes rested on her face, five years fell suddenly away from him, his body went rigid

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and he caught his lower lip between his teeth.

"What's wrong, Mac?" Sparling asked.

McCALLUM made no answer. His eyes, fixed on the woman's face, pulled her glance around until she was staring at him and he saw all the color drain out of her cheeks, saw one of her hands lift to her throat, saw her eyes widen with an incredulous surprise.

"What is it, Mac?" Sparling asked again.

McCallum started forward aware of a weakness in his knees and of a dry, tight feeling in his throat. A pace from where the woman stood, he paused.

"Rhea—Rhea, you?" he heard a voice saying, a voice which must have been his own but which didn't sound at all familiar.

The woman lowered her hand from her throat. She was tall, slender. A wealth of dark brown hair was coiled high on her head. Her face might have been chiseled in marble, so pale was it, so wholly without expression.

Her lips moved in a whisper. "Stewart."

"Touching. Very touching," murmured an ironic voice at McCallum's shoulder.

McCallum turned, stared at the man who had just spoken, and an icy calm settled over him. The man was large. He had heavy sloping shoulders. He was wearing a Prince Albert coat, unbuttoned and soiled here and there with grease spots. In the belt of his trousers, close to one of his hands, there was a gun. There was a grin on the man's lips but not in his eyes. His eyes were cold and watchful.

"Adam Gibbs, guerrilla," McCallum said slowly.

The grin disappeared from Gibbs' lips. A white line showed around his mouth. He said sharply, "The war's over, McCallum. It's not wise to remember back too far."

McCallum was aware of the fact that several men were standing around watching him and Gibbs curiously. He said bluntly: "Some things I'll never forget."

Gibbs' eyes narrowed; then the smile came back to his lips and, moving over to where the woman stood, he said, "Hadn't you better go to your tent, my dear?"

McCallum's hands clenched until his fingernails bit into his palms. He said, "Rhea—"

For a moment the woman's eyes looked directly into his, and McCallum thought that she was going to speak. But the moment passed, her eyes turned away from him, her shoulders slumped, and without a word she swung around and started for the door.

McCallum watched her leave, and as she passed from his sight he was suddenly aware of a deep, burning anger. He glanced over toward Gibbs. The grin was still on Gibbs' face, taunting him almost beyond reason.

He took a step forward and said, under his breath but still loud enough so that Gibbs could hear him, "I'm five years behind time. I thought Rhea was dead. I thought you were dead, Gibbs. I'm going to find out a thing or two, and when I do I'm coming back to see you."

Gibbs laughed. He said loudly, "Any day you feel like it, McCallum. Any day at all."

STEWART McCALLUM marched out the door and turned blindly down the street, the echo of Gibbs' laughter ringing hollowly in his ears. Footsteps hurried after him, a hand fell

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on his arm and Joe Sparling's voice said: "Easy, Mac. Not so fast. What's the trouble between you an' Gibbs?"

McCallum came to a stop. He looked back toward the gambling tent and saw that Gibbs was standing in the doorway staring after him. "How long has Gibbs been here?"

"Showed up a couple towns back, maybe a month ago."

"That woman I saw in his tent—was she—"

Sparling frowned. "I ain't never noticed her before, Mac. But then I wouldn't. I don't go in for that kind of stuff."

McCallum saw Gibbs step back into the tent. He said to Sparling, "Joe, five years ago Adam Gibbs was riding with Lorbeck's guerrillas through Kentucky and Tennessee. They wore the uniform of the North but they preyed on both sides. I'm from a little town in Kentucky called Ridgeway. I went there one day on a furlough and found the town in ruins. Most of the people who hadn't been killed had fled. My own mother and sister were dead."

"Lorbeck's guerrillas?"

"I think so but I never could prove it. Ridgeway was small. The incident passed almost unnoticed."

"That woman you saw in Gibbs' place—"

"Rhea March. She lived in Ridgeway. We were engaged. She and her sister disappeared on the night of the raid and later I heard that she was dead. Later, also, I heard that Adam Gibbs had been killed."

"You knew him then before the war."

"Yes, and others of Lorbeck's guerrillas, for a half dozen of them were recruited from the hills around Ridgeway. Ed Nyswander and Frank Wilcox were two, and there were others."

Sparling said quietly, "Nyswander and Wilcox are two of the men here with Gibbs. Wilcox is a dealer in Gibbs' tent."

McCallum sucked in his breath. "I've got to see Rhea. Rhea will know what happened the night of the raid on Ridgeway."

Sparling's frown deepened. "And then—"

"And then I'll go back and see Gibbs—and those others."

"You won't have a chance, Mac. Gibbs is too strong. He's utterly ruthless. He has a dozen men in that place of his who would kill at the drop of a hat, who are his to command. In there a few minutes ago while you talked to him, four guns covered you from different places in the room."

For a moment Stewart McCallum didn't answer. He was hardly conscious of having heard Sparling's warning. His mind still lived in the past. He was seeing again the smoking ruins of Ridgeway, the horror twisted expression on the pale, stiffening face of his dead sister, the glazed, frightened look in his mother's sightless eyes. The memory became so real to him that he shuddered.

A man came up to them and said to Sparling: "Brockway wants to see a man named McCallum. He said you might know where to find him."

McCallum blinked, shook himself. He said to the man, "Tell Brockway I'll see him as soon as I can. There's something else I've got to do first."

II

NIGHT had come. Stewart McCallum stood in John Brockway's tent office and listened to Brockway telling about the labor troubles at the Black Rock gorge, fifty miles ahead. Sparling

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lounged near the door. He had stuck at McCallum's side ever since they had left Gibbs' gambling tent and throughout McCallum's fruitless search for Rhea March and finally he had steered him here.

"I tell you, Mac," Brockway was saying, "that's the most important place on the road today. Unless that gorge is spanned when we reach it, we'll be blocked. There's no way around it. The bridge has got to be put in an' in another two weeks we'll be there."

McCallum knew the spot quite well. He knew that Brockway was speaking the truth.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to go up there," Brockway answered. "I want you to find out what is wrong. I want you to get the span across. I've got two hundred men up there. They've got all the materials they need. There's no reason in the world the bridge can't be completed in two weeks."

McCallum shrugged. He said, "All right, Brockway. I'll go."

Brockway nodded with satisfaction. "I can't tell you how important this is, Mac. We're stopped dead still if we don't get over that gorge. Henderson is in charge of the work up there. He's a good engineer but something's gone wrong. Here's a letter to him. Use your own judgment in handling the situation."

McCallum nodded. He took the letter Brockway offered, tucked it into his pocket and left the office.

Outside Joe Sparling said: "I can add a little to what Brockway told you. The men up there are kickin' about their grub an' their quarters an' the hours they've got to work. I've got a couple men in my gang who were up there for a while. There's some man they call Bull who seems to be back of the trouble."

McCallum grunted. He got out his pipe and then put it away. From over on the next street came sounds of merriment, broken snatches of song, the whining scrape of a violin, laughter and shouts.

McCallum's mind turned to Rhea March. He had tried hard not to think of her but to think only of seeing her. With Sparling he had visited the row of shack houses where the women of the camp lived but his inquiries for Rhea had been turned bluntly aside.

"Leavin' tonight?" Sparling asked.

McCallum turned abruptly between the tents to the next street and headed for Gibbs' place. Sparling lagged behind, now and then stopping to talk for a moment to someone. But he caught up with McCallum as the latter passed through the wide opening.

THE place was jammed. Men stood three deep around the bar and every table was crowded with players. Here and there women in gaudy silks moved through the throng, their laughter high and almost continuous, their chatter friendly and familiar.

McCallum's eyes searched the place. He didn't see Rhea or Gibbs, but his eyes fastened at last on a man dealing faro at one of the tables and he moved that way and stood opposite him, silent and still, until the man looked up.

The dealer was thin, pale and long of face. He had very black hair and tight, colorless lips. When his eyes fell on McCallum they narrowed, but he showed no other expression of his feelings.

McCallum said: "Hello, Wilcox. It's been a long time."

Frank Wilcox nodded. "Play?"

"No."

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Wilcox shrugged, looked back to the game.

Glancing past the gambler, McCallum saw two men come in the back entrance. One was Gibbs. The other, a shorter man with a barrel-like chest, he recognized as Ed Nyswander.

Walking around the table, McCallum moved that way. The two men saw him coming, stopped. Nyswander's hand slid down to his gunbelt and rested there inches from his gun, his lips drew back from his teeth, his breath started coming faster.

McCallum looked at him blankly and then turned his eyes on Adam Gibbs. He said in a voice meant to carry to no other ears, "Where is she, Gibbs? Where is Rhea March?"

Gibbs grinned. "Her name ain't Rhea March any more."

"Where is she?"

Gibbs hesitated, then said slowly: "All right, McCallum, if you want to see her you'll find her in the fifth tent up the street back of this one. It's the tent with the wash tubs out in front of it. My tent. An' she's there takin' care of my kid."

McCallum drew a deep breath. He bit his lips until the warm taste of blood seeped under his tongue. Then he pushed past Gibbs and walked out the back entrance.

Behind him, Joe Sparling shook his head at a score of men who had drifted into the place at his request and then hurried forward after McCallum. He had been too far away to hear what Gibbs and McCallum had said and when he stepped out the back door McCallum was nowhere in sight.

At the fifth tent up the next street, the tent with the wash tubs in front of it, Stewart McCallum paused. A light showed through the canvas walls and from within he could hear a woman's low, crooning voice singing a lullaby. For a long moment he hesitated. He felt, it seemed to him, almost as he had felt that morning when he had ridden into Ridgeway and stared into the dead faces of his mother and sister. Since that horrible hour and since the time when he had heard that Rhea was dead, all his emotions had been held under a tight rein. He had finished his service in the army, had drifted west. Into a score of dangerous and difficult assignments he had recklessly thrown himself. His nerves had become as steel. He had thought that never again would the time come when his emotions could run riot in his body, clouding his reason and numbing his mind. But now as he stepped forward toward the flap of the tent he discovered that he was trembling and that he couldn't help it.

"Rhea," he called. "Rhea, it's me."

The lullaby stopped suddenly, and he heard a rustle of motion from within the tent. Then the flap was pulled back, and against the light of the lamp Rhea was outlined.

"Rhea, could I see you for a minute?"

The girl caught her breath. She turned her head from side to side, and then said: "Stewart, you shouldn't have come. I—I'm afraid—"

McCallum stepped forward and the girl backed into the tent. "Rhea," he began, "I want to—"

The girl laid a cautioning finger over her lips. "Sssh, you'll wake him. He's just gone to sleep." She pointed to a crib across the room.

McCallum moved over toward it and stared down at the baby lying there. It seemed unbelievably small. Its face was very fat and pink. Two of the baby's fingers were in his mouth and he was sucking them industriously.

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"I thought babies sucked their thumbs," McCallum heard himself whispering.

"Some of them do," Rhea answered softly. "But he likes his fingers best. In a little while I can take them out of his mouth and he'll go right on sleeping. I—Stewart—I—" Her voice broke off.

McCALLUM was aware of a choked feeling in his throat, of tears in his eyes, of the smell of the baby. He straightened, looked around the tent. A line had been stretched from end to end at one side and on it were articles of baby's clothing. On a box near a wash-basin were bottles and pans. His gaze fell on Rhea. She was staring at him and the expression in her eyes stabbed him to the heart, "She is more beautiful," he thought, "than I remembered. Whatever she has gone through cannot have hurt her much."

She came forward, stopped just in front of him with her hands clasped stiffly in front of her. Then she said, swiftly: "Stewart, I didn't know—I—I heard you had been killed, I—"

"And I heard you had died, Rhea."

The girl shook her head. "After the raid on Ridgeway I went to my uncle's place in Cincinnati."

The mention of that raid brought McCallum up with a start. The picture of his mother and sister swam before his eyes. He looked away from Rhea and asked sharply: "What do you know about that raid?"

"I—what do you mean?"

McCallum drew a deep breath. "Who were those raiders, Rhea?"

The girl backed away from him. He saw her catch her lips between her teeth, twist her hands together nervously.

"Who were they?" he demanded.

"I—I don't know," she whispered.

"Lorbeck, Gibbs, Nyswander—were they with the men who destroyed Ridgeway?"

Rhea shook her head. "No, Stewart. No. None of them were the men. I—I don't know who they were."

McCallum stared at the girl. He had the very definite feeling that she was lying. Her eyes wouldn't meet his. But then, he decided, it was only natural that she should lie, for knowing him she must guess what he would do if she told the truth.

Behind him the baby moved restlessly in his crib. McCallum stepped forward. He grasped Rhea by both of her wrists, his hands tightening around them cruelly. "Tell me," his voice grated. "Tell me the truth. It was Lorbeck's guerrillas, wasn't it? Don't lie to me. Tell me about it. Who killed my sister—my mother? Answer me, Rhea."

The girl tried to twist away. Her breath was coming heavily. She said, "No, no, Stewart. You're wrong. I didn't know any of the raiders. You're hurting me. Please—"

McCallum dropped his hands and stepped back. He wiped a trace of perspiration from his forehead, turned toward the flap of the tent and pulled it open, meaning to leave. Then on a sudden impulse he swung around again, knowing that there had been too much between him and Rhea in the past for him ever to walk out on her this way, no matter what might lay between her and Adam Gibbs. And as he turned the crack of a shot sounded from outside the tent and a bullet scraped the skin of his neck.

STEWART McCALLUM'S reactions to that shot were entirely instinctive. He heard Rhea scream, heard

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the baby's waking cry, knew that somewhere out there in the darkness was a man who sought his life. That realization, and the stinging pain of the shot whipped the fogginess from his mind. He jerked back, half turned, jumped away from the entrance to the tent.

Another shot spat through the darkness, tugging at the shoulder of his coat, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the flash of a gun. Sprawling to the ground, his hand whipped out his own weapon.

"That one got him," said a voice from one side.

McCallum lay motionless, almost holding his breath. From where he had seen the flash of the gun some man laughed harshly, and then from behind him a voice said: "Better make sure, Harry."

Rhea had appeared in the tent entrance. McCallum couldn't see her but he could hear her calling his name, and the baby's plaintive crying sounded from within.

From the side came the scraping noise of a man's footsteps and from beyond, McCallum could hear someone else approaching. Rhea's presence didn't seem to bother the men at all. Supremely confident they drew nearer, closing in from three sides. Out of the shadows ahead loomed a figure and to the right was another.

McCallum thumbed back the hammer of his gun, lifted it and fired. He thumbed back the hammer and fired again. A man's hoarse scream shattered the silence of the night. McCallum rolled over and sat up. An orange tongue of flame stabbed down at him from some man's gun. He fired once more, got to his feet.

He heard footsteps running away, and then as he stepped forward Rhea came swiftly to his side.

"Stewart—Stewart—you are all right? They didn't—"

"I'm all right," he said heavily. He did not move.

The girl grabbed him by the arms. She said tensely, "Stewart, you've got to get away. If you don't he will—he will kill you!"

"Adam Gibbs?"

"Yes."

"Why, Rhea?"

For a moment the girl didn't answer. Then she said, almost desperately, "He's jealous of you, Stewart. Even back in Ridgeway he was jealous of you. He thinks I still—"

The girl's voice broke off. Stewart McCallum stared at her. Then, without quite knowing why, he said very softly, "All right, Rhea," and turned away, almost stumbling over the body of one of the two men he had shot. Behind him he could hear the baby crying.

III

STEWART McCALLUM slept that night in Joe Sparling's bunk-house, guarded, though he didn't know it, by certain of Sparling's men. He had said nothing to Sparling of his fight in front of Rhea's tent. Who the men who had attacked him were he didn't know. Who the two who had been killed were he didn't know. He guessed and not without reason, that they were men sent by Adam Gibbs, for Gibbs and Nyswander were the only two who knew where he had gone when he had left the gambling tent.

His sleep was troubled. Through his dreams stalked weird and ominous figures, and he awoke full of a great restlessness and weary in bone and muscle.

Sparling stood at his side as he opened his eyes, a breakfast tray

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brought from the cookhouse on a box near by.

"Time to be startin' out, Mac," Sparling said bluntly. "You've got a long ride ahead."

McCallum sat up, puzzled at first by Sparling's remark. Then he recalled the commission given him by Brockway, the trouble out at Black Rock gulch, his promise to settle it.

"Horse is outside," Sparling said.

McCallum dressed, bathed his face in icy cold water. The place on his neck where the bullet had scraped him the night before was red and swollen. He swabbed it off with olive oil and noticed that Sparling was frowning at him.

"Food smells good," he remarked.

Sparling grunted. "Couple men killed last night, couple of men who hung around Gibbs' place."

McCallum shrugged. He sat down on the bunk and drew the box with the breakfast tray up close to his knees.

"Interested?"

McCallum glanced up at him. "Joe," he said, "ever notice how big a thing looks when you're right up against it, and how different it sometimes looks when you go a mile away, when you get to where you can see all its twists and angles."

Sparling grunted. He was silent for a while and then said, "There won't be no trouble about those two men unless Gibbs starts it, but I'd watch my step if I was you."

McCallum finished his breakfast. He went outside, told Sparling goodbye, mounted his horse and rode west.

It was a long ride to the camp at Black Rock gulch. McCallum didn't hurry. For more than ten miles he rode along the line of rails stretching out from Balsum Springs and then for another ten miles he passed along the graded roadbed. His thoughts ranged far afield and were not pleasant. Of the task which lay ahead of him he thought but little. Whatever problems he would have to face when he reached Black Rock gulch he would face then. This commission he looked on as a breathing space between what had happened the night before and what must happen in the future. For between him and Adam Gibbs there could be no peace, regardless of Rhea or of his feelings toward her.

In mid-afternoon, Stewart McCallum topped the ridge of a little hill from which he could see the span over Black Rock gulch. The framework of the structure was complete, but braces and grading for the approach and a cut through the hill beyond, all a part of the job, had hardly been started. And staring ahead at the skeleton bridge across the gulch, McCallum frowned. Though a good two hours remained until sundown, not a worker could he see.

RIDING swiftly forward he came to the camp, a smaller duplicate of Balsum Springs, and as he entered it he noticed that the men who should have been working were lolling idly in the shade or were standing here and there in groups.

Heading for the company offices he passed close to two such groups. There was nothing distinctive in the appearance of any of the men comprising them. They didn't appear either worried or antagonistic. They had the look of men who might be discussing the weather or engaged in a mild political debate.

Reining in before the tent marked as the office, McCallum dismounted and stepped inside. Behind a pineboard table sat a thin-faced man who was

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almost entirely bald. On the table were two guns.

McCallum said: "Henderson?"

The man looked up. "What do you want?" There was a high, nervous pitch to the tone of his voice.

McCallum took out Brockway's letter and handed it over. Henderson read it, and some of the stiffness seemed to go out of his body. He laid the letter aside, put out a thin, bony hand and said: "I've heard of you, McCallum. I only wish you had come a week ago or even yesterday."

"Why?" McCallum asked.

Henderson sighed. "I'm afraid you're too late. Things have piled up. A week ago—"

"What things have piled up?"

"Little things."

"I'm afraid I don't get you."

Henderson got up. He stuck a pipe in his mouth and started talking around it. "Big troubles are usually a lot of little troubles. The men aren't working. They stopped at noon today. Ask me why and I couldn't tell you. Ask *them* and each man would give a different reason. The grub isn't good, the water isn't good, the hours are too long, the pay is too low, the construction plans make the work on the span too risky, the straw bosses are too hard on the men. Those are just a few of the little things. There are plenty more."

"How is the work coming?"

"Fine, until a week ago."

"If the men went back to work could you get the span, cut and grading completed in two weeks?"

"We could do it in ten days," Henderson's voice hardened. He bent over the table, picked up the two guns and added. "We're going to do it, too, if I have to drive the men to work with these. That span's got to go over."

His eyes met McCallum's.

McCallum nodded. "Let's go look at it."

He turned to the door, stepped outside, stopped. A group of men were walking toward the office, and at the sight of him one of them raised his voice and called: "There he is, fellows. The guy sent up here by the big boss. He's gonna make up work an' like it. Look him over."

McCallum watched the group approach, noting especially the man who had spoken. He was a large man, heavy and broad of shoulder, long of arm. His face was ruddy, bearded. His nose was flat. One eye was slightly squinted.

Something about the man seemed familiar. McCallum frowned, searching his mind for an understanding of an impression that he had seen the man before. Then he heard one of the other men say, "He don't look like much to me, Bull," and with that statement McCallum's memory clicked. This man facing him was Bull Perrine, once a member of Lorbeck's guerrillas along with Adam Gibbs, Wilcox and Nyswander.

BUT his recognition of Perrine didn't show in his eyes. Henderson moved up beside him, a gun in each hand, and several of the men in the group facing him reached for their guns.

McCallum turned to Henderson. "Put up the guns," he ordered.

Perrine laughed. "Backin' down, huh?"

Looking at the man, McCallum wondered whether or not Perrine knew him. He also wondered how Perrine happened to know of his mission. But he let those two things pass and said, evenly: "Pass this word around for me. Work starts again tomorrow at seven. Any man not on the job at that

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time can pack up his stuff and leave. I'm not going to force any of you to work. Those who quit will be replaced. I'm interested in only one thing: getting that span completed. It's going to be done and it's going to be done on schedule."

Again Perrine laughed, then he said derisively: "Hear that, fellows? Like all the rest of them he's only interested in the span. If the grub you're served poisons you, he don't care. If the water's bad it don't mean nothin' to him. . . . To hell with you, mister. We don't work until conditions are improved."

McCallum's lips tightened. He said: "Seven o'clock tomorrow you go back to work or get out of camp." Then without waiting for an answer he turned and walked toward the span, and Henderson followed him.

During the remainder of the afternoon Stewart McCallum inspected what had already been done and what still remained to be completed. He talked to the cook, sampled the water supply. Moving casually through the camp he talked with a score of men. He found most of them surly, disgruntled and unfriendly.

Later that night he talked to Henderson again. Henderson was nervous. "You went at that the wrong way, McCallum," he insisted. "The men were already upset. Your threat will have angered them. I'm afraid of what may happen tomorrow. What will you do if they refuse to work?"

"Order them out of camp."

"And if they refuse to leave?"

McCallum drew a deep breath. "Is Bull Perrine their leader?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been here?"

"Three weeks."

"Was there any trouble before that?"

"No."

McCallum nodded. He said slowly, "The food here seems to be as good as the average, if the cook didn't lie to me. There's nothing wrong with the water. But the men on this job have been up here in camp without any of the advantages they would have had at the main camp. That is, after work there's nothing for them to do, there's none of the excitement of the main town. A few weeks of nothing but work and it would be easy for some man to come in and foster a feeling of unrest, discover little troubles and talk the men into thinking they were big ones."

"But why, McCallum?"

"There's only one reason I can think of. And I can't prove that. But there's nothing wrong with the camp or the way the men have been treated as far as I could discover, and even before I came up here I heard of this Bull—and that he was back of the trouble. So, though I can't prove it, I think I know what's back of the trouble."

"What?"

"If this span is delayed, what happens?"

"Work on the road will be held up."

"Exactly. And that means that the Central Pacific, building out to meet us from the West Coast, will go ahead while we are held up. So far a meeting place for the two roads hasn't been selected. The Union Pacific, building from the East, and the Central Pacific building from the Coast are in a race to see who can build the most miles. The government subsidy allowed each road is $48,000 a mile in the mountains and $32,000 a mile on the plains. That's a prize worth fighting for. It means dividends in the pockets of the stockholders."

"You think that the Central Pacific

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would hire a man to do a thing like that?"

"No, not the Central Pacific. But some stockholder of the Central Pacific might, just as some stockholder of the Union Pacific might try the same thing. Maybe I'm wrong, Henderson, but I can't see any other reason. And as for Bull Perrine, I think I know how to handle him."

"Don't underestimate him."

"I'm not."

IV

AT SIX-THIRTY the next morning the men of the Black Rock Gorge camp began gathering in the street in front of the company tent. From the open doorway, McCallum watched them. He noticed Bull Perrine moving casually through the crowd, stopping to talk for a few moments to one group and then to another. And each time, after he had left, the group to which he had talked became noisier and more demanding.

Henderson, standing at McCallum's shoulder, grew more and more nervous and kept fingering his guns. "You can't handle them," he said over and over. "This has gone too far—too far."

McCallum made no answer. He kept his eye on the clock, and at a quarter before seven he turned back into the tent, unbuckled his gunbelt and dropped it on Henderson's desk. Then he walked over again to the door, said to Henderson: "Keep your guns out of this," and stepped outside.

As he walked forward the crew grew silent. A dozen paces from them, he stopped. For an instant he looked from side to side, then making his voice as casual as possible, he asked quietly, "Well, do you go back to work or not?"

"No," one man shouted. "Try an' make us." Others took up the cry and the men surged forward.

McCallum didn't move, didn't try to talk, and as he stood there waiting, he could notice that some of the men were looking at him with puzzled expressions on their faces. Gradually the shouting subsided and then McCallum spoke again.

"What do you want?"

"Better grub."

"More money." And then again the crowd grew noisy, different men calling out different things.

McCallum held up his hands, and when the men were again still, he said: "All right. Any demands that are justified we will meet. Name some man to present your claims."

"Bull Perrine," several men shouted.

Perrine stepped forward. There was a wide, triumphant grin on his face. He turned around and looked at the men behind him and called, "When I get through we'll own the Union Pacific."

A shout followed by laughter rolled over the crowd.

Perrine turned to face McCallum. "All right, talk up."

McCallum was frowning. He looked from Perrine to the crowd of men.

"How many of you," he asked suddenly, "were in the war? Raise your hands."

Nearly every hand went up and some men called out their regiment names and numbers.

"I was in the war, too," McCallum stated. "I was captain of Company A of the —th Kentucky regiment. The war's over, I know, but some things that happened in that war I can never forget and one thing today I will not do. This man you have named to represent you, this Bull Perrine, was a

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member of Lorbeck's guerrillas. His hands are red from the blood of murdered women and children and his pockets are heavy with loot. I will not deal with him. Name some other man."

AN INSTANT of intense silence swept over the crowd. The men in the front ranks stared at Perrine, stared at McCallum. Perrine's face was flushed. His breath was coming heavily. Anger burned in his eyes.

"That's a lie!" he shouted. "A dirty lie!"

McCallum shook his head. He moved swiftly forward until he stood at Perrine's side. "It's not a lie. Name your company in the war, but be careful, for if you guess blindly maybe you'll name the company of some man here. That would be a mistake."

Perrine blinked. He moistened his lips with his tongue. His eyes narrowed craftily and then suddenly and without warning he grabbed for his gun.

McCallum smashed the gun from his hand. He rocked Perrine with a blow to the head, followed that blow with others. A moment before he had appeared as a mild-mannered, quiet sort of man. Now he became a raging machine of destruction. The full weight of his body was behind every blow and he was utterly without mercy.

Perrine staggered back, stabbed out with his fists, tripped and fell. He got up pulling a knife from a sheath at his neck. Blood streamed from his nose, and one side of his face was bruised and swollen. Curses drooled from his lips. He sprang forward lashing out with the knife. McCallum caught his wrist. He swung it into an armlock, tightened the pressure. Perrine kicked at him, raked his fingernails across McCallum's face, gouging for his eyes. Then suddenly Perrine started to scream.

McCallum pressed down on his wrist. The arm broke with a sharp crack and, releasing him, McCallum whirled around, smashed another blow into Perrine's face, and then when he fell, moved to stand over him.

"Perrine," he said, and his voice rasped like a file, "start talking or I'll break every bone in your body and I'd do it with pleasure. First, who paid you to cause trouble in this camp?"

Through bruised and bloody lips, Bull Perrine gasped, "Gibbs. Adam Gibbs. I—I"

"And who paid him?"

"I don't know."

"You rode with Lorbeck?"

"Yes."

Stewart McCallum was unaware of the men crowding around them. He didn't realize, then, that his own face was bloody from the fight or that the promise of death was in his voice. Perrine was broken, frightened. He knew that. And before the man could rally his senses he knew that he must make Perrine talk.

"Did you ride with Lorbeck when he raided Ridgeway?" he thundered.

"No—Lorbeck didn't raid Ridgeway. He—he was killed the week before."

"But Lorbeck's men did."

"I—I don't know. I was wounded. I—"

"Who took Lorbeck's place after his death?"

"Gibbs."

McCALLUM straightened. He felt very tired suddenly, but the path before him was clear now. When he had recognized Perrine as one of Lorbeck's guerrillas he had guessed that there might be some connection between Gibbs and the trouble here. The fact

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that Perrine had known his purpose in coming to the camp had made him sure that the trouble here was being deliberately fostered, for word of his coming must have been sent on ahead.

Staring at the men around him he recalled what he had said the night before and he asked: "What time is it?"

"Two minutes of seven," someone answered.

McCallum nodded. He said flatly: "Then you have two minutes to get on the job. The men not ready to work by seven can get out of camp. If you have any grievances, take them up with Henderson tonight." His voice tightened. "Look, men. You're building a railroad, a railroad that will stretch from one ocean to the other, that will open up the wilderness, that will build the greatest nation under the sun. Get that notion in your heads. You ought to be so blamed proud of what you're doing that you'd eat jerky and beans regular, crawl to work on your bellies, and pay the Union Pacific for your jobs! Now get out of here. You make me sick."

Some man said: "I guess you're right, mister. We've been plum durn fools."

McCallum turned away. He caught Henderson's arm and walked back to the office with him. "I've got to leave, right away. Keep Perrine here. This job is only half done."

Henderson was perspiring. He said: "McCallum, I've never seen anything like that out there in my life. You—well, I want to thank you. I—look—"

Henderson pointed outside. Men were trooping toward the span, going back to work.

A thin smile touched McCallum's lips. He felt very little personal satisfaction. The problem which lay ahead occupied his mind. Gibbs and his crowd had to be cleaned out. They had been behind the trouble here. That was reason enough. But from his standpoint there was another reason. He knew, now, from what Perrine had said, that Gibbs and his men had been the ones who had destroyed Ridgeway. Perrine had admitted that Lorbeck had died a week before the raid. That in itself was admission enough. Perrine would never have said that if he hadn't known about the raid.

McCallum bathed his face and his bruised knuckles. He told Henderson goodbye, saddled and mounted his horse and rode east.

V

BACK in Brockway's office late in the afternoon, Stewart McCallum repeated the story of what had happened at Black Rock Gulch. Brockway heard him to the end, then stepping to the door, he sent for five men. Half an hour later they assembled, anticipation in their faces.

Brockway's orders were simple and direct. Here in this town his authority was supreme. "I want you," he stated, "to arrest Gibbs and every man associated with him. You know who they are. Disarm them and bring them to me. If they resist, do what you think best. Pick out what men you need to help you and act before dark. Don't come back without them."

The five men looked at one another. One of them said: "Sparling's gang. They could clean out hell in half an hour. If there's any trouble they might come in handy. If we're going to get men, let's get them."

The rest agreed.

McCallum listened to their plans. He was included with them but still he felt apart, and listening to the quiet

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tones of their voices and watching their faces he knew what the end would be. These men would carry out Brockway's orders. If Gibbs and his men resisted, that resistance would be overcome. The waters of this remaining group of Lorbeck's guerrillas had already run their course.

Joe Sparling was found. He hunted up his men, stationed them around Gibbs' gambling tent and notified Brockway's office that they were ready. And as the last rays of the setting sun streaked down from the mountains, the back and front entrances of Gibbs' gambling tent were suddenly filled with men and at a shouted order a deep hush fell over the large, smoke-filled, tented room.

Mounting the bar, one of the five men selected by Brockway announced bluntly, "This place is closed. All U.P. men get outside. The rest of you stay. If you feel like debating the matter you will be accommodated right here and now."

The man held two guns in his hands. His face was grim and unsmiling.

Those men in Gibbs' place knew what he meant, knew what was happening. This was another clean-up. There had been clean-ups in the past, would be more in the future. Players grasped for their money, headed for the doors. The women, pale of face below their rouge, crowded back against one of the walls.

There were mumbling voices but no one spoke—none protested aloud.

Standing on a box near the rear entrance, Stewart McCallum's eyes swept over the room. He saw Frank Wilcox shrug his shoulders and stare blankly at the man standing on the bar. He saw Ed Nyswander, his face clouded with anger, move over near the women. He saw here and there other men whose faces were not familiar but who made no attempt to leave. But nowhere did he see Gibbs.

In less than two minutes the room was cleared of all but a dozen men and a few women, and the man on the bar again spoke.

"You men unbuckle your gunbelts, drop them and march forward. This way."

Several men started to obey, but with a sudden motion Nyswander darted behind the women.

He drew his gun.

"To hell with you!" he shouted. "How do you like this?"

His gun crashed and the man on the bar tottered backward. The women started screaming. McCallum jumped off his box and ran forward. Some of the gamblers had raised their hands but a few of them had joined Nyswander in his desperate battle. Death stalked into the tent. The woman in front of Nyswander twisted away and Nyswander went down under a fusillade of shots. Others fell. To one side, a gun in each hand, Frank Wilcox stood erect until his last bullet was fired, then, the last of those who had resisted to go down, he slumped over and sprawled on the ground, his face toward the top of the tent.

McCALLUM reloaded his gun. Joe Sparling and his men had entered the tent and were now binding the hands of those who had not resisted. Plans were being made to start a search of the town for Adam Gibbs.

Walking over to where Wilcox lay McCallum was surprised to discover that the man was still alive and as McCallum paused, Wilcox said: "You hate me, don't you? I can see in your eyes that you do."

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"You rode with Lorbeck," McCallum answered.

Wilcox closed his eyes, opened them again. He said slowly, "I don't blame you. I think I hate myself. I had one chance to get away—but didn't take it. I—I only broke her heart. I should have gone. She—"

Blood choked off his words and McCallum turned away, wondering what ghost had returned to haunt Frank Wilcox in the last minutes of his life.

McCallum left the gambling tent, pushed his way through the curious crowd outside and turned over to the next street. Soon the search for Adam Gibbs would be under way. It would aim first, he thought, and quite naturally so, toward the tent which he was now approaching, the tent to which Gibbs had directed him on the night he had talked to Rhea. And as McCallum neared that tent the feeling came to him that here would be played the last act in the drama which had started years before in Ridgeway. Adam Gibbs would be here, and when he faced Gibbs—

Reaching the tent he pushed back the flap and entered. Then he blinked and stared around the room. The place was empty. To one side stood the baby's crib, but there was no sign of the baby or of Rhea or of Adam Gibbs.

McCallum frowned. It was possible, he decided, that Gibbs had anticipated the trouble ahead and had fled. Possible, but not likely. He turned around, stepped outside.

A voice addressed him from the corner of the tent, a voice which was cold and harsh and bitter.

"Don't move, McCallum. Make one attempt to get your guns an' you'll never move again. I've got a bead right on your head."

McCallum turned his head. A few paces to the left crouched the figure of Adam Gibbs, cocked gun ready in his hands. The barrel was wavering a little, as if Gibbs was tense and excited.

McCallum said, "Well?"

Gibbs swore. He said bitterly: "I've got you to thank for what's happened, McCallum. I can guess that. I knew that you would figure things out as soon as you saw Perrine. I gave him orders that you weren't to return. Well, maybe I'm finished but you are too. There's just one thing I want to show you before you die. Here."

Gibbs' free hand ducked into his pocket. It came out with something which glistened a dull yellow. The man laughed harshly. He tossed the object toward McCallum so that it fell at McCallum's feet. "Recognize it?" he taunted.

McCallum stared down at the gold disk. He felt a cold perspiration break out all over his body. The gold disk was a locket. The sight of it struck him with cold horror.

"I tore it from your sister's neck," Gibbs snarled. "Shall I tell you about it?"

McCallum's breath hissed through his teeth. He thought of his sister, his mother. A bitter rage burned in his veins. His hand whipped to his gun. He knew that he couldn't draw it, cock it and fire, before that gun in Gibbs' hand exploded, but that realization didn't stop him. Nothing but death itself could have stopped him.

The crashing sound of a shot burst in his ears. Pain stabbed into his breast, raced with stinging fingers to every portion of his body. His gun came up. Before him he could see the leering, sneer-twisted face of Adam Gibbs. He fired, cocked the gun and fired again. Then suddenly that face was no longer there, and through a gathering fog he

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heard men running forward and heard someone saying, "It's Gibbs, an' from the looks of him he's finished. Help me with this other fellow. He's shot up some. . . ."

THE train was slow in starting. One of the seats had been taken out and a bed made, and there McCallum had been fixed as comfortably as possible.

"Though the doc says there's nothin' to be worried about," Brockway stated, "I'm shippin' you to Omaha. We can't take chances with men like you. The road needs 'em."

McCallum managed a grin. "We'll get over the hills," he whispered. "In another year, two years maybe, a ribbon of steel will span the continent. A ribbon for people to ride on."

Brockway nodded and left, and after a while the train started.

McCallum tried to relax, tried to turn his mind toward the building of the road, but thoughts of Rhea kept intruding. Where had she gone? What had happened to her?

After a while the train stopped and McCallum thought that he heard a baby crying. At first he put it down to his imagination but the sound came to him again, and calling to the brakeman who happened to be passing through the car, he said: "That baby that's crying. Where is it?"

"Car ahead," the man answered. "Some gambler's kid."

McCallum's lips tightened. "Go tell the woman with the baby that I want her—the baby too—if she'll come."

The brakeman shrugged, walked on ahead, and another trainman who had just come into the coach in time to hear McCallum's request said, "I'm glad that girl's takin' the kid out. She came in here just about a month ago. She's the sister of some woman who was the wife of a gambler named Wilcox. The gambler's wife died when the kid was born an' this girl gave up her job somewhere in the East to come an' look after the kid. But this ain't no kind of life for children."

McCallum blinked and then suddenly the whole story became clear to him. He understood, now, the dying statement of Frank Wilcox. Wilcox had been married to Rhea's sister. Rhea's sister had died and Rhea had come out to care for the baby. When he had talked to her she had lied about the raid on Ridgeway, not because of a loyalty to Gibbs but in order to try and keep him, McCallum, from danger. And Gibbs, in insinuating that Rhea was his wife, had done it deliberately to torture him. Gibbs hadn't worried, anyhow, about what Rhea might tell him. From the very beginning, Adam Gibbs had plotted to bring about his death.

The train whistled, started to move, and looking ahead Stewart McCallum saw the coach door open and saw Rhea standing there with the baby, her sister's baby, in her arms.

He called, "Rhea," and saw her start moving toward him, and as she came closer he saw that she was smiling.

A feeling of peace came over him. He said, "You belong here, Rhea. You've been away too long."

The girl nodded. "Yes, Stewart. And the baby?"

"The baby too. I'll make a railroader out of him, an empire builder. Some day—"

The train rocked on through the night.

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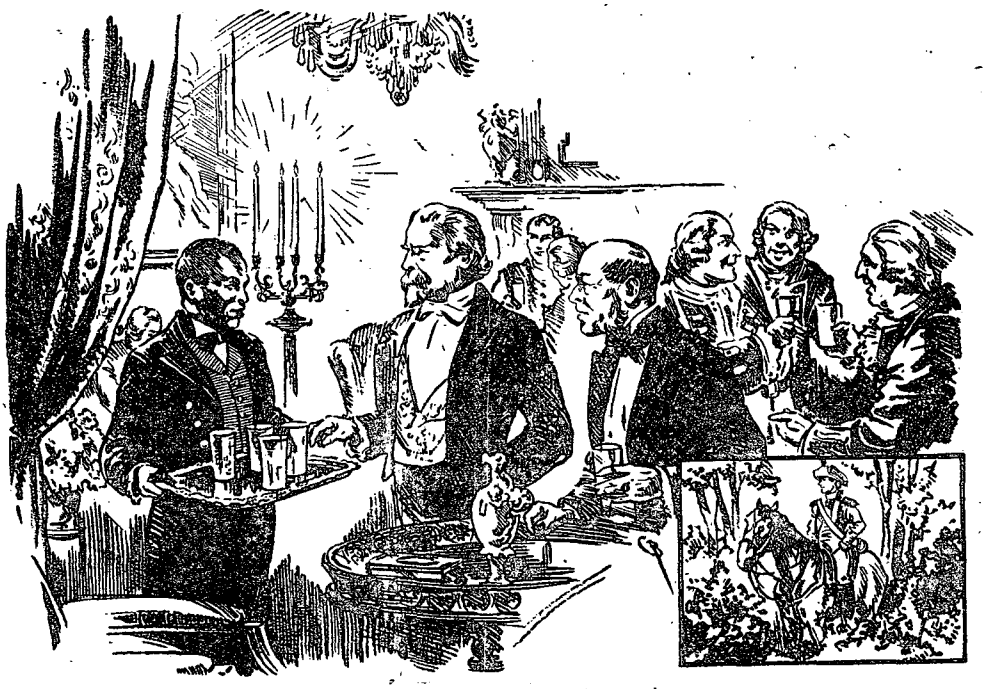
A Whip For the Colonel



By ALEXANDER KEY

Author of "Fortune Has Horns"

A tale of the days when Tarleton's Redcoats rode roughshod through Carolina

IT SEEMS like yesterday, but my grandfather got it from his grandfather, who was there that night at the stag at McQueen's and who watched how the tide of history was turned because a little man wouldn't down a drink.

They say he was a hard-bitten young devil, my grandfather's grandfather, quick with his fists and his tongue, freckled and sandy and with the same blue glitter in his eye that all the James men have; a captain in the Second Militia at twenty-two, and he could ride horse with men like Morgan and Harry Lee. He knew them all, those great ones of the Revolution that you never hear tell about—Black McDonald and Crabstick, John Laurens and the Horry boys, and George Dennison who sang ballads he'd made up in the swamps at night. Gavin was in the Brigade with the rest of them.

But it started at McQueen's. The

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house stood just around the corner on Tradd Street, and when old Alec McQueen gave one of his dinners—they were the talk of Charles Town, as some people still know the place—he'd lock the doors and windows, give each guest what he liked, and have him under the table by cock's crow. He'd keep a servant or two to boot back and forth to the tap room, and as long as he was able he'd waddle around, discarding peruke, ruffles or waistcoat with every other drink, and all the while his sly red eyes would be on the lookout for a gentle sipper. A man learned to drink at McQueen's.

I can see the place as if I'd been there with young Gavin: the spring night outside fragrant with honeysuckle and magnolias, and the city strangely quiet after three weeks of cannonading; the big drawing room reeking of pomatum and spirits; a hundred food odors drifting from the littered dining room, thickening a staleness already too thick from sputtering tapers and tobacco.

And there was the clink of glass and mug and demijohn; the low, satisfied murmur of a score of fine gentlemen preparing to forget a blackguard named Clinton and become properly insensible before morning. . . .

GAVIN JAMES was uneasy. It was not so much that the room was too hot, and that he was the only young man present. The thing was something he couldn't put his finger on, and it had crept in from the sweet night beyond the barred windows. He spraweld in a corner, keeping one eye on the clock and the other on his colonel across the room, and wished he didn't have to mind his liquor. He'd promised, without realizing what it meant, to have the colonel back to the batteries, sober, by midnight. Sober from this place—with every door and window locked and old McQueen pouring the stuff faster than a man could swallow it!

It was a wonder how the colonel could hold so much and still keep his feet. He stood in the opposite corner near the ample figure of Mr. Bee, a dark, quiet little man in a militia uniform so stained and powder-blackened that McQueen's Negro servant wouldn't have worn it. A noggin of rum was always at his lips. He should have been drunk, but his black eyes were awake, watchful, and queerly troubled.

Gavin saw him glance at the clock as McQueen was filling his noggin again. When McQueen turned to look after Poyas Bee, the mystery of the colonel's sobriety was suddenly explained. McQueen, looking slyly back over his shoulder, saw the thing at the same time. It was the beginning, as Gavin realized later, of a curious chain of incidents that was to affect the lives of everyone in the room.

The colonel was caught in the act of tossing five fingers of the best rum in Carolina into the fireplace.

McQueen stared at him. "Bless me!" he muttered, and waddled to the colonel's side. "I say, are ye daft on yere feet? Ye'll be needin' o' that an' more to fight the fevers an' the British!"

Mr. Bee chuckled. "You can't put 'im on the floor, Alec. I've told you 'e's not a drinkin' man!"

"'E's 'ere, Poyas, an' 'e'll 'ave to drrrink!" McQueen blinked foggily and without recognition at the colonel while he refilled the noggin. "Come, come, sorrr; the night's afore us! 'Ave a snifter in the right place—a toast to General Ben Lincoln!"

The room quieted. The colonel frowned and his well-cut lips tightened.

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He raised the noggin slowly. "To Lincoln," he said fervently. "God help him; he needs more than a toast. Another week and he'll be forced to capitulate!"

"Eh?" rasped McQueen. "Capitulate? Nonsense! Twice the blhoody Britons came yapping' around us an' we fired their breeches. Now we have Lincoln an' his whole damned arrrmy to hold the beggars!"

The colonel's gentle-strong face hardened until it was hawk-like; his black eyes flicked over the room with a steel thrust that drove it to dead silence. Gavin could hear every watch ticking.

"Mister McQueen; gentlemen," the colonel said quietly, "the devils are at our doorstep. Sir Henry's regulars are on the Ashley and the Neck, and the moment wind and tide favor, Arbuthnot's fleet will be up the channel. Mark me, seh, his guns will blow the city out of the marsh. I warn you all to leave while there's still time!"

McQUEEN'S jaw clicked. "Damn Arbuthnot an' Clinton!" he roared. "Gad, sorr, 'tis no night to turn alarmist! The war's nigh over, an' while we have honor we'll hold the city! Drrink an' drrrown your fears!" He was purpling and he wanted to say more, but the colonel had set off a spark and they were all talking now. Poyas Bee was on his feet shouting.

"Whash dish, Franshis?" cried the burly Poyas—Mr. Poyas Bee, Master of Hounds, who had known the colonel for forty years. "Dash treashun, Franshis! Treashun!" He careened over the rug, his wig awry and one thick fist shaking a turkey leg in the colonel's face. "Dishonor'ble talk, Franshis. Don't become your pash record. No Ca'liny gentleman would run from a li'l noise an' follow the ladies to the country. Why, there's e'en been Whigs advish Lincoln to retreat an' let the scoundrels have the city!"

"I was one of them," retorted the colonel. "And, by Harry, if I were in command I'd retreat tonight and at least save the army!"

"We're glad you're *not* in command," rasped McQueen, abruptly sober. He shrugged. "But come, drink, we have the night—"

"*I'll* give him a drink!" snapped Poyas. "Then I'm done with him." He flung the contents of his glass into the colonel's face.

The little man stood rock-still. Whether he was angry or not Gavin could not tell; but he could see the stinging hurt in him.

"Poyas," he spoke finally. "You're drunk. I forgive you."

"Now, now," muttered McQueen, coming between them. "We be all good Whigs. I beg you, there's nought to pull hair about. Mister Bee was a bit hasty, an' our militiaman no doubt has the interests o' Ca'liny at heart. Come, gentlemen, three whiskeys to patch the matter, an' a demijohn to seal it. Mister Bee, please . . ."

But Poyas had lumbered away, and young Gavin saw he was beyond conciliation. The clock struck. Gavin caught the colonel's eye and slid to his feet. He approached the colonel and began reciting the little reminder the two had planned between them. "You have the night inspection at twelve, sir, and there's that matter of more sandbags for the south wall. We'd best hurry." It was beyond Gavin, why the colonel should have taken the stand he did when all knew there was nothing to worry about, and why any man, with twenty-four hours leave and in his right mind, would want to leave with

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so much good liquor untasted. But the colonel had not been himself for a week.

"My respects, Mister McQueen," the colonel finished. "If you will pardon our haste—"

"Haste bedamned!" McQueen was indignant. "Faith, old Ben Lincoln knows where ye are; he'd have been here himself if he hadn't had too much of his own rum. Rotten stuff! Gad, sorr, do ye ask me to unlock my doors an' allow ye to leave cold sober? By my faith, I've ne'er done such a thing in thirty years! The keys are hid an' ye can't get out. 'Ere—" He thrust forth a bottle. "Drrrink, Major, an' I'll make a real Whig o' ye by dawn!"

At McQueen's a gentleman must at least pretend to drink. The colonel tipped the bottle up, and in ten minutes it was half empty and he was staggering with the others. Whether most of the liquor went down his throat or into the urn behind him, Gavin never learned, but when McQueen left for the taproom the colonel nodded sharply and slipped through the hall to examine the rear door. Gavin followed.

The rear door was locked and before they could try the windows Gavin heard McQueen coming. They hurried up the servants' stairway to the upper hall.

Both gallery doors were locked and the colonel swore. But the sewing-room door was ajar; he entered and eased open a window. He was leaning out of it, drinking in the sweet air when Gavin asked him if he wasn't making a mistake by wanting to quit such good company and leave the trouble with Mr. Bee unsettled.

The colonel grunted. "Mistake, lad?" He pointed across the Battery and the harbor where the lights of Arbuthnot's fleet were winking on the horizon. "There's an inshore wind, if you know the meaning of it. I'm confounded if I'll be caught drunk and napping when all hell's getting ready to pop. I'd hoped to open the eyes of that crowd below—they're important men and that sot Lincoln will do what they say. But there was no chance to talk. They're all daft and blind."

"But, sir, we've been tasting Clinton's medicine. It hasn't harmed us. See, they've stopped wasting powder—and the fleet will never dare sail past the fort."

The colonel pulled down a curtain, fastened it to a table leg and heaved it over the sill. "They'll sail if the wind holds. Out with you! There's a power of work ahead before we're ready for them. Would to God I were a bigger man."

GAVIN reached the curtain's end, dropped the remaining few yards to the ground. He had gained his feet when he heard an oath, and was just in time to see the colonel's spare body falling like a plummet, torn curtain clutched in his fingers. He landed in a heap, and there was a queer sound as if some one had stepped upon a dry stick in the woods. The colonel groaned, lay still a moment, then burst into a cold fit of cursing. He seldom cursed.

He had snapped an ankle bone. As Gavin remembered it, it was as if all the colonel's world and hopes had suddenly come to an end. He sat there, striking his leg with a clenched fist and shaking his head, such a look of futility on his face as Gavin had never seen. And all at once Gavin understood.

He was a small man, with only a colonel's stripes on his jacket, but Carolina was in his heart and his mind and he'd been carrying the weight of her on his shoulders. For a week he'd

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fought to be listened to—and they'd told him such talk didn't become a man who'd cut a name in the Cherokee wars and been cited for valor in the last siege. Liquor from a lost friend smarted in his eyes. He was a terrier barking at shadows, and now all he had for his trouble was a cracked leg bone. He'd lost his last right. A man can't get out and fight with a broken leg.

Gavin understood, though he did not agree, and he failed to see the writing on the wall until it was too late.

He got the colonel to his rooms, fetched and helped the surgeon, and at the colonel's order went over to headquarters to report.

It was after twelve and he was expecting to see no one there but the night officer. But when the guard admitted him he found that the pot was on the fire, boiling, with much history waiting to be decided. The staff and the engineers were muttering over charts, disheveled and showing the fatigue of weeks; beyond them was a hasty delegation of merchants all talking at once and talking loudly, as if they could banish fears with high words and strong opinions. Old Ben Lincoln sat facing them, only half sober, sweat dripping from the turtle creases of his neck. He seemed amused, and his big lower lip was pursed as usual, holding back his thought as well as his quid. Uncertainty showed only in his eyes.

Sir Henry had sent his summons: surrender within twelve hours, or he would blow the town out of sight.

Gavin listened, watching Lincoln vacillate between the frowns of his engineers and the insistence of the delegation. What the engineers advised Gavin didn't know, but the delegation was clear enough. Beneath their Whig fervor and talk of fight was the fear of Lincoln ordering a retreat and leaving Clinton to count spoils.

Lincoln spat, delivering himself of tobacco and words. "All right—all right! If ye don't mind a li'l more shell an' noise, we're standing pat! I'm not runnin' like Washington did at New York. We'll show 'em who has mettle!"

A faint cheer, and the place quieted to the uneasy whisperings of new fears. Lincoln saw Gavin. "Where's yuh colonel?" he asked.

Gavin told him. Lincoln wagged his head in groggy sympathy that contained a measure of relief. He had a big man's tolerance for the little colonel, though he had found him annoying.

"'Stoo bad, but thas what he gets for turnin' down McQueen's likker. 'Ere—" He scrawled something on a piece of paper. "Pash. In mornin' send 'im out the city, his plantashun. Recuperate. Thas order, unnerstan'? The fightin' will keep till 'e gets well. Run along now."

GAVIN hurried away, dazed, eager. He was on a dark stage then, before a black curtain that would draw aside at any moment. He could see nothing, though he could sense an approach of something he couldn't grasp. But a fire was in his veins and he visioned more sorties beyond the lines, his men whooping it up like demons as they clashed with some of Sir Henry's cavalry. Gavin loved war like wine. There was a glory in it then, and honor, and a man was either a clod or a soldier.

The colonel sat propped in bed, bloodless lips compressed, eyes points of hard jet in the candlelight. He heard Gavin through without a word, stared so long at Lincoln's pass that he seemed to be sleeping. It was weeks

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afterward before Gavin had an inkling of what was taking place in his mind then.

Abruptly, sharp as a rapier thrust: "Lad, help me up. Help me dress."

"But, sir, you—you're unable to move now! Tomorrow—"

"Help me up, I say. Then call for my horse."

Gavin could only stare at him. "Your—horse?"

"My horse," snapped the colonel. He struggled to rise, wincing with each movement of his bound leg. "I'm leaving Charles Town tonight."

"But, sir, I—I beg you—"

"My horse. And get yours. You're coming with me."

"I—" Gavin was speechless. Leave the city, its excitement, its parties, its open doors to young gentlemen in uniform—leave it for a bachelor's dull plantation house where the nearest thing in petticoats lived ten miles across the swamp? He'd had enough of that back home on the Waccamaw. (Gavin had been raised by a brother and had grown up a wild hellion in buckskins. Charles Town was life, and though he still had a thing or two to learn of polish, he'd been accepted by virtue of his recklessness and the James blood in him.)

Gavin straightened, clicked his heels together. There was his company to look after, and there was fighting ahead. The colonel must be mad. "Sir, I beg to remind you that I am an officer in the militia and that I cannot possibly leave my company at this critical time."

"Captain James, seh," the colonel answered softly, "I beg to remind you that I am your superior officer. I order you, seh, to do as I say without another moment's delay!"

Gavin said no more. With disappointment bitter in him, and uneasiness heavier in his mind, he and the colonel's servant helped the colonel into his clothes and onto his saddle, and rigged a sling from the pommel so the broken leg could ride the easier. Sir Henry's men held every ferry on the Ashley, and with a strong sea coming in, the mile-wide Cooper was too rough to be crossed. Gavin was astonished to learn that His Majesty's Dragoons had not only taken over the Dorchester highway, but controlled nearly all of Charles Town Neck. Only the Cooper River road remained open.

Sir Henry had evidently not deemed this road worthy of notice. It ran down through marsh and thickets of sweet myrtle, hip-deep in muck from the spring rains. Gavin cursed it and went floundering ahead to pick the way. Alone he would have used the main route, and devil take whomever he met.

But this was vinegar to him. Give him his company now, a free hand, and he'd mop up the highway soon enough. Instead he was sneaking away by the side door, running, playing nursemaid to a man who had evidently lost all reason. Lincoln was right. There'd been no sense in leaving McQueen's. Leaving Charles Town was even more ridiculous.

Oscar, the colonel's Negro, barked at him once to slow down, for the colonel's sake, and added that the road may have been left open as a trap. Gavin looked back, stifling oaths and feeling his neck burn. In the clear starlight he could see the colonel's white horse sliding through muck and water with a queer, halting walk as if he knew every movement brought pain. The colonel rode without a murmur, hands braced on the saddle and chin on chest; he seemed crushed and entirely oblivious of himself. Oscar, a little man like his

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master, rode beside him, scolding the horses and scolding McQueen, the night and the sucking mud. Gavin swallowed suddenly.

There was a pounding off to his left where Sir Henry's men were probably placing mortars, and for awhile he traveled warily; but the way remained clear, and after an hour he heard only the frogs shrilling.

THE FALSE dawn had come when they reached the St. James parish road. They had seen no one. Gavin dozed. The salt marshes and the war lay behind, one eternal, the other already a part of yesterday. He was speculating on the dullness that lay ahead when the roar of the colonel's pistol brought him violently back to the present.

The next hour until dawn was something he never remembered clearly, for it only presaged a black tide that was to sweep every former thought from his mind. He saw the road ahead blocked with the vague, cross-belted figures of horsemen, heard the hoarse shouts of still others closing in behind, and slogging hoofbeats in the mud. A trap, certainly, and no way out of it.

He dazedly emptied his pistol, hurled it at another rider, and then he was in a mad vortex of cursing shadows, the taste of hot blood in his mouth and his saber clanging sparks. And he thought: This is impossible; two of our own companies were stationed out here to keep the way open! What's happened to them?

He'd been praying for a fight. He fought now in bewilderment, and Oscar and the colonel fought beside him; the colonel sitting crookedly in his saddle, clubbing with his pistol while his sword parried flicking steel. Oscar a screaming lunatic with a cutlass, a crazed old hen driving hawks from a chick.

There were too many of them and the colonel should have cried for quarter. But he was in no mood for quarter that night. He cut a path ahead, barking for Gavin to come on. For Carolina. It didn't make sense then, but the name rose in Gavin's mind as if it were a bright Andromeda calling. It may have been McQueen's liquor.

Gavin's saber went spinning; he roweled his horse, crashed into a dragoon, drove his fist into another's face. Ahead he caught glimpses of the colonel's thoroughbred, plunging, kicking, teeth bared like a wild thing at the other horses. Then they were through, the colonel's horse a white flying bird with his tail plumed straight and the colonel an arched feather on his back.

A little man with a broken leg. It'll never knit right, thought Gavin. See, he's up in the stirrups—he'll be a cripple if he lives. But they can't catch us. We have the horses. Even Oscar's filly can throw mud in their eyes.

After awhile the colonel's horse took a ditch and vanished in the timber. It was dawn now, and when Gavin came up with him the colonel's horse was standing rigid as if he were afraid to move, and the colonel was slumped across his neck in a dead faint.

Gavin helped lift him to the ground. They were all three bleeding; Oscar, gnarled fingers trembling, went over the colonel carefully before he paid any attention to his own hurts. "Nary bad cut on 'im," he mumbled finally. "Hit his laig ail 'im most. We tote 'im over to Mis' Singleton's 'cross de bottom. Mebbe she loan us gig to fotch 'im home."

There was a gig at the Singletons', but no harness animals left to pull it. Colonel Tarleton, of His Majesty's

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light horse, had already seen to that. Gavin swore. It was incomprehensible—the scoundrel riding away from the Neck when there were two good companies of cavalry under Buford and Huger out to check him.

Gavin rigged a litter with a pair of saplings which he slung between his horse and the colonel's. They started northward again. The colonel's dark face was flushed and he began talking incoherently. He raised up once, calling for his pistol and his saber, which Gavin carried. Gavin told him he had lost his own. The colonel stared at him dazedly, eyes bloodshot. "Careless," he whispered. "We'll need them. And we'll need a whip. A whip—"

He's out of his head, wanting a whip, thought Gavin. And then Oscar, leading the way, stopped suddenly. The colonel's horse stopped, ears laid back. A roaring was in the air. It came abruptly, filling the sky and shaking it as if worlds had collided and were crashing through all eternity. A horrid, grinding, symphony of thunder.

Thunder from the fort, from the city, from Sir Henry's mortars strung all the way from James Island to the Neck. Then it doubled and trebled, reaching a pitch that could have only one meaning. Arbuthnot's fleet had come up the channel, pouring fire and hell into the city.

"Hit's startin'!" wailed Oscar. "Hit's startin'! Dey gonna take de city—dey gonna take Ca'liny!"

"Shut up!" snarled Gavin.

"Dey gonna take Ca'liny; Marse Francis said dey would!"

GAVIN didn't believe it possible, not even when he read the signs and saw the colonel, feverish and hobbling on crutches, order his plate buried and his stock hidden in the swamp. He didn't believe it even when red-coated cavalrymen swept past on the road on some grim errand, and for nearly a week he and the colonel had to live in the woods. But there was no denying it when a frightened messenger from Singleton's brought final news.

Yes, the city was a wreck, and Sir Henry had what was left of it. Hundreds dead. Lincoln a prisoner, every continental, militiaman and citizen a prisoner. Huger? Buford? Butchered; if he wanted proof he could ride over to Biggin bridge and see the bodies of Huger's men rotting in the muck.

But he'd better not be seen in that uniform—they were hanging Whigs in Dorchester, raising companies of Tories in every parish. The State? There wasn't any state. Carolina was again one of His Majesty's colonies, and all men of property were hurrying to sign the "Protection." It made an Englishman of you, maybe, but it saved your house and your neck.

The colonel lay on a pallet on the veranda, saying nothing, something deadly and brilliant in his eyes. Gavin was thunderstruck. He stared a long time at the messenger disappearing across the fields; finally he picked up his leathern militia cap, thumbed it, dropped it, and began unbuttoning his jacket.

The colonel asked softly, "What are you doing, lad?"

"I—it's all over, sir. We—we're whipped. We can't be caught wearing these things now. I'm thinking you'd better be seeing about that Protection business."

"Captain James, seh, put on your cap!"

"There—there's no army, sir. And with Buford and Huger wiped out, there's not e'en a platoon of patriots left in the entire South. For all we

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know, we're the only men in uniform still at liberty. And you, sir—you're a sick man!"

The colonel got up on his crutch, one fist shaking. His black eyes stabbed like poniards. "Enough of that, seh! Why in damnation do you think I made you get me out of the city that night? To sign Protection? Good God, seh!"

He hurled his crutch across the veranda, straightened with only his cane. "Call Oscar. Have him saddle the horses and pack bags. There's some powder and a pistol of sorts in the gun room. Get them. And put on your cap, seh!"

It was an order, and it burned through Gavin like fiery whiskey. They left, and as Gavin often said, it was with little time to spare. Even then Sir Henry's men were but a mile away, plaguing the parish, burning, taking all they could carry or drive in front of them. Food, plate, hard money; cattle, horses and niggers. They left nothing, unless it was the resisting Whigs hanging from the liveoaks. It was no longer war—it was conquest.

THE next few weeks were a nightmare to Gavin. They lived in the thickets, Gavin and Oscar foraging by night, or Gavin riding errands for the colonel. Useless errands. The colonel was ill, irrational at times, and he wanted a number of queer things. Things that could be of no earthly use to a man in hiding, who risked hanging merely by remaining armed and in uniform. Quills and ink, powder, money, caps—leathern militia caps with those three futile words *Liberty or Death* stamped on the crescents. And sometimes when the fever lay upon him he called for a whip.

This last seemed dominant in his mind, an ultimate goal to which his other wants were in some way connected. Gavin brought him little but news, all of which was bad. He did make ink for him from pokeberries, and thinking to please him, even entered the partly burned parish meeting-house one night and salvaged a few caps. And finally he brought him a whip.

The colonel seemed almost rational when Gavin handed him the whip. He looked at it strangely, swarthy face grown pale and haggard, eyes bloodshot and sunken. "This isn't the kind of a whip I wanted, lad."

Gavin slumped in the canebrake where they were hiding, throat tight and hope strangled in a black weariness. "Is it a bull whip you're after, sir?"

"If I could crack it the length of Carolina. But a little whip will do first, Gavin. One that I can snap at Sir Henry's heels, at the rear of his convoys. It's the kind of a whip we'll have to make ourselves."

"Make ourselves—" Gavin sat up, plucking at the wiry stubble on his jaw. Then he began to sense what the other was driving at. The idea amazed him no less than the tenacity which had fostered it in the face of so much futility. A little man, a cripple . . .

Something unnamable welled in Gavin like a fresh spring; suddenly he was talking, planning, even daring to hope.

"There—there are my cousins, sir; I heard they were paroled home with a few of the militia officers. There's Mr. Bee and several members of the hunt, back at their country places after signing Protection. And I think I could get Ted Delancey and the Motte boys. They weren't in the city. None of 'em have much money on hand, but they've the best horse-flesh in the country hid-

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den in the swamps. If those will come, scores more will follow. They're drinking a bitter dose, sir, and all they need is the right man to get them started."

And leg or no leg, thought Gavin, the colonel could do it. He was the best drill-master south of Canada, and men always fought to be in his company. Gavin looked at him earnestly. "Shall I go and see them, sir?"

Gravely the colonel handed him a pile of letters written on pages torn from his record book. He'd been getting them ready while Gavin foraged. "Pray to God they'll come," he said.

Gavin glanced at the names. "They'll come. They're gentlemen."

The colonel grunted. "Our gentlemen do most of their fighting for honor. There's no point of honor involved here, and damned little glory for the dashing young bloods. Only our necks if we get caught."

"There's plenty of honor involved!" Gavin bit it out savagely. "No man worth his liquor is going to swallow Clinton's damned medicine and lose his birthright in the bargain. They say our birthright is only a bit of swamp and not worth the powder to blow it to hell. But, sir, I—"

"Your viewpoint has changed considerably in the last few days," commented the colonel. "But go see these gentlemen I've written to. They're our only chance."

"You're forgetting the rank and file who followed you during the Indian troubles. Faith, your name's a by-word with every settler in the tidewater!"

The little man shrugged. "They'll not fight Redcoats."

"They fought the Cherokee. They'll fight again to save their skins."

"Their skins are safe enough with Clinton; they've nothing he wants and they'll knuckle under to keep peace. It'll take money, Gavin, to call a poor man out of his field and leave his family. Hard money—not this confounded stuff." He drew a thick roll of continental bills from his pocket. "Not worth a brass shilling!"

He shook his head grimly. "No, Gavin, our only chance is to raise a small body of horse among the gentlemen. Go after them. And while you're gone I'll do an errand of my own."

"Gad, sir, I'll do your errands. You're not able to be about yet."

"I can ride, and there's one errand you can't do."

GAVIN did not guess what that errand was until he thumbed through the messages the next morning, miles away on his careful circuit of the parish. There was no note for Poyas Bee. And Poyas, richest planter this side of Middleton's, lived away over on the dangerous Camden highway where forts were going up and Sir Henry's men swarmed like ants.

Gavin made his rounds, a matter requiring much stealth and, as he soon found, more fortitude than he possessed. At the beginning, hope had been smouldering through the defeat in him, needing only the promise of action to send it flaming. It did not flame; it slowly died and went out. He was amazed at first, when men gravely read the messages, then offered excuses or vehemently pointed out the impossibility of such an enterprise. They offered continental bills, some of them; a few offered horses—if Gavin would steal them and in no way implicate the owners.

Gavin was incredulous; finally he was furious. He had no hope now, only the deep thing that still welled in him, and a biting rage that burst out of control when he cornered Ted Delancey

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at the latter's stables. Ted was bargaining for a deer brought in by a grizzled, dirty hunter in buckskins.

They both listened till Gavin was done. "My respects to Colonel Francis," replied the handsome Ted, "but I think he's daft. What could we do with a body of horse against Clinton's thousands? Play hide-and-seek in the swamps with 'em? Pick off a man or two and a bit of baggage—for what? Who'll feed us, give us powder? The beggars have got the state; they'll soon have every colony back. If I so much as joined, they'd burn the house, take everything we have, and confiscate the land. You know how the Crown treats a rebel. Father signed the Protection; we've got to live up to the terms and not bear arms against the Crown. I don't like it any more than you, but—"

It was a sensible argument, but in that moment Gavin remembered a little man tossing in a fever and calling for a whip. The hard, bright look in his eyes when he brought him one. "What'll you do," snarled Gavin, "when Clinton orders you to crawl into a red uniform?"

"He'll not do it! The Protection emphatically said—"

"To hell with the Protection! Doesn't Ca'lina mean anything to you?"

"We lived under Crown rule once. I'll do it again to save my home!"

Gavin hit him. The blow came up from his knees, and behind it was all the rankling bitterness in his heart. It brought a chuckle from the watching hunter; Gavin did not hear him. He whirled without looking back, got into his saddle and rode off, eyes blue ice and his jaws so white with rage that the freckles stood out like spatters of brown earth. He galloped down the main highway without knowing it, and it was not until he had almost ridden into a patrol of merrily singing dragoons that he realized where he was.

They gaped at him in disbelief; Gavin hurled curses at them, sent a pistol ball through a plumed cap, and dared them to follow as he roweled his horse over a fence and raced through the pines. He stopped once, wishing they would follow, and swore when he saw that none of their mounts could negotiate five feet of rails.

BACK at the canebrake the next evening he found the colonel hunched over Oscar's tiny fire, slowly shredding a heap of continental bills and dropping them into the embers. Their eyes met, read mutual failure. Gavin sat down, saying nothing for a long time.

He didn't ask about Poyas Bee. He could vision Poyas, contrite, apologetic after the affair at McQueen's, heavy square face a little redder than usual. And Poyas shaking his head and growing vehement while he looked out over his many acres. Poyas offering continental bills and horses, perhaps, but not himself. Saying that Carolina was whipped, the thing finished, to hurry back and sign Protection before the rascals put a brand to the house. And the colonel saying to hell with Protection.

"Gentry!" Gavin spat out. "Blast them! Their fool honor made them hold the city to the last ditch. Forgot good tactics and common sense. Their fool honor cost us every fighting man we had, and the state besides. It may cost us the country. And where's their confounded honor now?"

"Signed away on a worthless scrap of paper, Gavin."

The colonel struggled upward, leaned heavily on his cane, and slowly

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straightened. He seemed weary unto death, but his mouth was a trap and his eyes chipped jet. "My horse," he snapped suddenly at Oscar. "We're leaving."

Gavin looked at him dully, wondering what strange brand of courage still lashed him on. "Where to, sir?"

"North, Gavin. The governor escaped and carried his office in his chaise. We'll see him; perhaps he has money and can help us raise men. If not, we'll go on, find men somehow."

Find men somehow! We're finished, thought Gavin. He was standing there, the hopelessness eating through him, when he heard a stealthy sound of footsteps in the canebrake, then abrupt silence. He whirled, pistol out. "Who's there?"

"Hit's friends, Capt'n." A figure moved into the firelight—the hunter he had seen at Delancey's stables. Following him was a second figure, a boy, with another man behind him.

The hunter's darting eyes took in the camp and came to a rest on the colonel. He stood ill at ease, rubbing a big rawboned hand along the polished surface of his rifle. Gavin wondered curiously what could have brought the fellow here. They had no money to buy game.

"Howdy, Cunnel," mumbled the tall man. "I reckon you all done forgot me."

The colonel started at him; suddenly he hobbled forward and took his hand. "Crabstick!" he whispered. "You old swamp devil, I haven't seen you since the Cherokee days. Can Hanna still shoot?"

The man chuckled. "She's allus been good at hittin' red. I reckon as how she'd be as fair on a red coat as a red skin, if'n she had the chance!"

The colonel could only look at him. "Sho, I hyeared tell as how you was wantin' men, so I brung a couple. Step up, Denny; an' you, Mac. Meet the cunnel. My boy here," he nodded to the youngster standing spraddle-legged and owlish, one jaw bulged with a quid of tobacco. "My Denny, he's fo'teen, but he's kilt a bar at a hunnerd paces. Thar's a sight more o' us said they'd come, soon's they kin lay in a bit o' cawn."

The colonel struggled to speak. "I—I've no money, gentlemen. It'll have to be without pay until I can raise some."

Crabstick's big paws tightened on the rifle. "I been offered pay. T'other side." He spat. "May be the quality don't see hit, but to my way o' thinkin' thar's a heap more'n money on my mind now. Our wemmin folk says as how they kin make out, if'n we'd come home some to watch the fields. So we're all j'inin' up with ye, Cunnel. An' up Williamsburg way thar's nigh on fo' score Irish Whigs a-hidin' an' a-cussin' in the swamps. Yo' name's been mentioned as the only fittin' man to take 'em over. Jest give 'em time to git their bile up, an' they'll be askin' fer ye."

Gavin looked at the colonel, grinning. "Your whip, sir. And it looks like it'll be made of the best rawhide."

It was of rawhide, as Gavin said, but it finished with a velvet coat. For, before the week was out, Ted Delancey came, looking grimly at Gavin, and with him were the Motte boys and Poyas Bee. Poyas was without his wig now, and quite bald under his tricorn; he brought his nigger, several blooded horses, a ham and two demijohns of rum—the only things he'd managed to gather together before His Majesty's Dragoons arrived with a summons for service. Sir Henry's Protection had grown a set of teeth; gentlemen who had signed it must don His Majesty's red or suffer accordingly.

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"Damned insolent scoundrels!" Poyas ground out. "They can trick me and strip me, but they'll not take my honor. I'll talk to them next over a rifle barrel! Forgive me, Francis, for being a blind fool."

The colonel clasped his hand.

Poyas opened a demijohn. "We'll drink on it, Francis." He stopped, looked around him. "We'll all drink on it," he added gravely, thereby destroying the barrier between settler and gentry. "Come, boys: to Colonel Francis Marion! May God help him and his Brigade!"

The colonel glanced down at his leg, still sore and knitting badly. It would never be straight. He raised his noggin. "To the Brigade—and to Alec McQueen!" The last phrase was devout and barely audible.

Gavin heard it, and he remembered it. But for a locked door and a broken leg, the thing might never have been. He did not forget it during the long black months that followed, when they lashed their pitiful few on convoy and patrol, when they starved and used pebbles for bullets, and watched hope die with the death of a relief army. There was no hope, but the colonel drove them on with his quiet voice and the steel in his eye; a rawhide lash that he cracked with incredible force down the line of Sir Henry's forts and on to the very gates of Charles Town. Men broke parole to ride with him; other men whispered his name from the Floridas to Quebec, and cursed it in London.

But you can find all that in any American History book. The main thing is that it all started at McQueen's. And it only seems like yesterday because I got it from my grandfather's grandfather and on a foggy night in the swamps beyond our town I sometimes can see the crippled little "Swamp Fox" riding at the head of his motley rebels on a fine white horse and I can see him swing his cutlass so the moon glints on it. He's crying, or he's moaning "Ca'liny". . . . But I'm imaginative. He's just a name—Colonel Francis Marion—in the history books to you, and, as I say, it's all like yesterday to me, and it may be the wind in the pines I hear.

Puzzles By Wire

SINCE the Western Union has announced that punctuation marks will be free, unless the sender writes them out, wags—and people who merely want to save money—are busy composing telegrams. Recently a blushing lad clad in the field green of the W. U. corps rang an apartment bell and when a comely young woman had opened the door and identified herself, she received a kiss that had been sent by wire from an admirer. Since the edict allowing free punctuation, people have been ripping open yellow envelopes and getting puzzles. Since you may be next, there's nothing like a little practice. Try this one:

— home 4a . pa in , Very ′ Dr ‵ Survival ?

(*If you need help, turn to page 142*)

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Tobacco Jamboree

By HENRY F. CHURCH

Author of "Governor's Escort," "Woman on His Mind," etc.

The Governor's escort rides again—and the results, as usual, are . . . terrific

IT WAS the Big Day, at the Midburg Annual Tobacco Jamboree, with the governor, scheduled among some dozen other speakers, holding forth in the scorching heat. This meant for Big Angus McCannon and Doggy Pedros, uniformed members of his motorcycle escort, a long siege of complete boredom.

Stretched on his back in the dubious shade of a cottonwood, Patrolman McCannon chewed his cud like a supine ox, and waited patiently, until a languid bootblack had imparted a passable gloss to his companion's shoes, before contracting his puffed cheeks to emit an accurate, amber stream toward them.

Pedros had just expressed thanks that the celebration following the tobacco auctions happened only once a year, when the jet struck.

Convulsed with stentorian laughter, the big man covered up his head with beamlike arms to ward off the wrath of his fiery companion, but the saturnine face of the smaller man was expressionless. "Why that honor?" asked Doggy with disarming dignity.

Temporarily stumped for an answer, Big Angus scratched his sandy thatch. "Aw, just a little souvenir, in keeping with the occasion," he said finally. "You know, just something apropuss like your putting that crab in my tool-kit, down at the fish fry, last week; only my remembrances is more refined, like you can mop that off and don't have to mash it off with a rock like when that crab anchored on my thumb."

"Your point is well took," said Pedros, and restored the polish to his shoe by vigorous rubbing with a white silk handkerchief.

Big Angus watched him with an amused expression that turned swiftly to choleric

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dismay. "Why you—*you*—" he spluttered. "How'd you come by my new silk handkerchief?"

"Boy, I'm like that!" chortled Doggy, "'Keenly alert, and ready for emergency,' just like the book says!" He flicked the ruined handkerchief back to his irate companion, hitched up his belt, and set his cap at a rakish slant. "You know it's a puzzle to me, why these political speeches always run exactly one hour and four minutes. It ain't doing right by the Skipper to handicap him like that. One hour and twenty minutes is his normal time. It's like taking a good mile-man in a race, and making him do a three-quarter heat."

"All of which leads up to let's eat, huh?"

"We got forty minutes to put on the nose-bag."

McCannon got up. "I'll go first," he volunteered. "Something is bound to happen to the Skipper's car if we both go."

"Nope, we both eat together. I saw that blonde the same time you did."

AT THE restaurant the tall, hard-faced blonde was apparently not interested in the big ruddy man, nor his small dark companion, although she did venture a slight smile at the sunshade of golden tobacco-leaves that Pedros had tucked under the back of his cap, giving him the appearance of a member of the Foreign Legion.

McCannon said, by way of introduction, "I suppose you'll be shaking a dainty hoof at the dance tonight, baby?"

She gazed at him with cold blue eyes. "When I do dance, I shake 'em in pairs," she drawled. "You guys want to eat, or you just come in to drink up the water we set on the counter?"

"We're eating, but we're Southern boys, and we like a little hospital-ity with our meals. They ain't using you for a pre-cooling system around here, are they?"

She slapped down a menu before each of them. "Them meals are numbered," she told McCannon, coldly. "In case you can't count over three, just point, and I'll get you."

"You already got him, sister," contributed Pedros, "he falls for anything. Me, now, I want a burnt steak, some canned peas, stale bread with rancid butter, and a little weak coffee. I don't expect nothing out of life, and when I don't get it, I'm not disappointed. Incidentally, I like brunettes; I've got one; and, socially, I won't be at the dance, so, all that being settled, let's have a little service."

Big Angus said, fatuously, "Just let your dainty finger wander, baby, and where it stops will be my choice. All I crave is something in keeping with my bulk and personality." He was slightly chagrined when his order, selected by the waitress, turned out to be a sizable hunk of dubious-looking cheese.

After she had had her little joke at the expense of Big Angus, she relented and served him a succulent dish of roast pork with turnip greens, and they were soon in subdued conversation, casting amused glances at the silent Pedros, who had got exactly what he had asked for.

McCannon learned that she was from Chicago, and that she didn't like Midburg. She had been there three weeks, three months, or three years, she told him, she wasn't sure which, since they had no calendar in the joint.

"Life is like that," said Big Angus sagely. "We never know where we'll land up. Me and Pedros served overseas as promising enlisted personnel, but all the reward we get for our patriotism is wet-nursing the Gov'nor, who was our Cap'n; burning up the taxpayers' gas running all over creation to fish-drys, tobacco jamborees, bridge openings—Doggy, there, fell through one draw—school dedications, and such tripe. I suppose your life has been as sad. What made you leave Chicago?"

"Excuse me," she said, and became busy elsewhere.

"I bet the parole officer could answer that," growled Pedros, who had been listening in.

"Always belittling, ain't you? My guess is she's some society dame what's suffered a set-back. Poor kid, she's probably eating her heart out with neuralgia!"

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"Don't look, now," cautioned Pedros, "but I fancy you mean 'nostalgia.' Howsoever, I'll match you for the bill." He flipped a coin and McCannon called tails, and lost.

ON THE way back Big Angus said, suddenly suspicious, "Let's hold that quarter, Doggy. I wouldn't be surprised if it's got two heads!"

"Neither would I. I found it tied up in the corner of your silk handkerchief."

Back at the platform another speaker was pleading some vague political cause, and they made a frantic search for the Governor's car.

"It's gone of course!" moaned McCannon. "It always is, when we try to eat!" However, their anxiety was brief. An accommodating citizen told them that his excellency had gone to lunch with the president of the Midburg Bank, and had left word for them to follow.

"We might as well go back to the restaurant and get your gloves, which you so carefully left," suggested Pedros.

"You really ought to be a cop!" growled McCannon, and straddled his machine. When the gloves had been retrieved, after some delay, Big Angus came out grinning. "If you had any *éclair,*" he told Pedros, "I might save you a dance, tonight. How we going to find out where this bank president lives in all this vast metropolis of four hundred souls, and twenty tobacco warehouses?"

A dapper young man in a silk polo shirt and flannel slacks, who had been talking to the girl when McCannon had gone in, and who had followed him out, answered the question. "That's easy. I'm Jefferson Kindall, Junior. The president is my pater."

"That," explained Pedros kindly to McCannon, "means the old geezer is his father. Well, how do you get out to the barony, fellow? We got to pick up the Gov'nor there."

"Oh, there's no hurry. They'll drink juleps all the afternoon. How about some cold beer, my treat?"

They thought the idea was good, and, under the urging of their host, the empty bottles accumulated. He was very enthusiastic over the season's bumper crop. It seemed that the county had produced twelve million pounds, and most of it had been already sold. "Think of it, boys!" he said excitedly.. "Twenty-one-fifty a hundred, with even the sand lugs going. Our vault is bulging!"

"That ain't all that's bulging," said Pedros, loosening his belt. "We really ought to be going. Sometimes the Skipper drinks less juleps than at others. He's up here politicking and that sometimes affects his appetite, and makes him very democratic to mingle with the voters. If your old man don't swing a mean fistful of votes, that lunch won't last long."

Their host settled for twelve bottles of beer. "I'm glad I ran into you boys," he said earnestly. "It may be providential that such good men and true are in town."

"We're at your service," declared McCannon, flattered.

"Quite," said Pedros, tipping his cap gallantly, so that his tobacco leaves fell all around him.

"THAT'S heartening. The fact is I'm greatly worried. Midburg is the chief tobacco-market of the county, and there's a million and a half in that little red bank of ours!"

"Great gravy!" gasped McCannon. "Nearly a month's salary for me and you put together, Doggy!" Then to their host, "That now bank has got a safe, and that safe has got a lock, ain't it, Mr. Kindall?"

"Why, certainly."

"Well, what are you worrying about?"

"Big-time yeggs. The pater scoffs at the idea, because he has never had a loss, but there always comes a time, Mr. McCannon!"

"Yeah," yawned Big Angus, "there always comes a time. Now, if you'll direct us where we'll find the Hot Shot, we'll render our adieu."

"Boys," pleaded young Kindall, "this is serious. I've got inside information that

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our bank is scheduled to be tilted by experts tonight. Father pooh-poohs the idea, but all three of the police force will be on duty at the dance. Boys, you've got to help me!"

"My good beer-buying friend," soothed McCannon, "I'm inclined to pooh-pooh, along with your papa, that no big-time yegg ever heard of Midburg; but, indirectly, we can help you. The Skipper is slated to crown the Jamboree Queen at the dance, and we'll be detailed there, thus releasing two of your local constabulary for bank duty."

To their astonishment young Mr. Kindall began to weep quietly. "Excuse me, boys," he apologized, "but I can't help it, the future of the banking name of Kindall depends on your help!"

"Yeah," agreed Pedros sympathetically, "I don't believe the Federal Reserve bunch would laugh that off. Give this guy a break, Big Angus, them ain't no alligator tears he's squirting!"

"Thank you, boys," gulped the young man, "you'll never live to regret it! Here's fifty dollars for each of you, and, if that money is saved, there'll be another fifty on top of it for each of you!"

McCannon reached promptly for the money and pocketed it. "Of course, when you talk like that you touch my better nature," he told the donor. "I saw it your way all the time. Just what's your plan?"

"Simply that you stand by the bank with me. If you catch the crooks, you'll probably get the reward; anyhow, you get the promised bonus. You can't lose."

"Rewards ain't usually offered *before* a crime," argued Doggy, shrewdly. "I mention that just because I like to get down to facts."

"Oh, but there are rewards outstanding for this gang from other jobs, and—"

"Pay no attention to him, Mr. Kindall," said McCannon, "we'll be there. I'll polish them off and get back to the dance early."

FOLLOWING the directions of the grateful young man, they arrived at the Kindall mansion, just as the Governor was leaving. "Where you clowns been?" their boss demanded.

"Frankly, we was resting. This escort business is a trying, tiresome job, embroidered with no mean responsibility," McCannon said respectfully.

The Governor took that under advisement. "I suppose time does hang heavy," he admitted. "Well, beat it on your own. I'll stay the night here, and shove off for the Rufusville cornerstone-laying tomorrow. Meet me at the hotel, at eight in the morning."

Pleased with their release, they sped back to the town and found the bank closed. However, they located young Kindall in the restaurant, talking with the blonde waitress. He was glad to see them. McCannon drew him to one side and said confidentially, and not for Doggy's ears, "We been thinking we better have lots of leeway on this job, now, and if we could wire a couple substitutes for tonight to wet-nurse the Skipper, we could give our undivided time to this. Of course telegrams, overhead, and transportation would eat up another twenty, with a ten-spot each for the inconvenience we'd cause our two substitutes in rushing 'em here, but I offer that only as a suggestion."

"Excellent!" said young Kindall, and peeled off another fifty-dollar note. "Meet me outside the bank at eight." Big Angus hoped that Pedros didn't see him in the mirror, as he slipped the bill in his glove, but you couldn't tell about Doggy, he was slick that way.

Over at the town square the political talking seemed destined to go on forever, and their new boss had gone back to talk with the waitress. "This is stupid," commented Doggy. "Likewise it's dumb! If we'd stuck with the Skipper, we could at least have rushed around sounding our sirens. Let's go to the hotel, and get some shut-eye."

The room that they managed to badger out of the harassed room-clerk of that overcrowded little hostelry, was too hot to sleep in, so they went down to the lobby, which boasted an electric fan. Here flies

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and mosquitoes took them as easy prey, and, barricading themselves in deep lobby chairs, they took refuge under the spread pages of a week-old copy of the New York *Times,* left behind by some tobacco-buyer.

BIG ANGUS, dozing under his improvised tent, heard the sum of one million five hundred thousand dollars mentioned, and became alertly awake. The remark had not apparently penetrated the ears of Doggy because his paper shroud rose and fell with a rhythmic crinkling.

"I suppose I do take an undue risk," said a pompous voice, "but I'm constituted that very way. I've always worked alone in this bank game, and I haven't done badly."

McCannon could hear another voice answer in lower pitch, but he couldn't make out the words. The pompous voice spoke again. "I think you're wise there. It would be better to go over the details in your room, where we'll have secrecy. I'll pick up a bottle, and be there in five minutes. Two-twenty isn't it?"

McCannon peeped out, but they were gone. He prodded Doggy out of slumber. "I've trailed down the brain guy," he informed, "he's holed in at room two-twenty."

After a reasonable wait they tiptoed up the creaking stairs to the second floor. The door of the room they sought was closed and there was no transom over it. They could hear the booming, pompous voice, but the words it uttered were blurred. Doggy, who was a direct-actionist, was for rushing in and making it a hand-to-hand conflict, but Big Angus steadied him.

"Strategy is the word," he told the smaller man. "The fools have left the key on the outside. We'll lock 'em in!"

"Suppose they phone down for help?" asked the practical Pedros.

"You have to have a telephone for that."

"Then, they'll pound on the door when they find it locked."

"I think not. They won't want to attract attention. They'll probably wait quietly for darkness, and plan to drop out the window. In the meanwhile we'll know where they are, and can concentrate on the muscle guys, who'll do the real work. Let's circulate."

They went back to the lobby and found a new clerk on duty. "There's a pair of drunks in two-twenty," informed McCannon. "Pay them no attention if they get a little noisy. They're locked in for their own good."

"I get you," said the clerk.

A scheduled ball game had quenched the speaking in the public square, and they rolled slowly past the bank to marvel at its puny dimensions.

"If I was feeling good I could push it over," sneered Big Angus.

"I doubt that," replied Doggy, "but keep your eyes to the front, there's an observation-post over in that grass, across the street."

THEY circled the block and stalked the observer from the rear. The element of surprise was complete, and they soon had him bound and gagged. He was a hard-faced man with a gun in his hip pocket. Thankful for the deserted street, Big Angus draped the prisoner across his handle bars, and drove down to the police station centered in the block. It was closed and locked, with a sign announcing that the force was on duty at the ball game. The big patrolman twisted off the lock with one mighty gloved fist, and put the prisoner, still bound, in storage. "I know it's hot in here, fellow," he told the glowering captive, "but we ain't taking no chances on you talking."

Back at the hotel the clerk told them that the drunks, in two-twenty, had knocked and yelled awhile, but had quieted down. They complimented him, and ate supper in relays; one watching the window, while the other appeased his hunger. Just before it was time for them to go to the bank, they deputized a colored bellhop, and, arming him with a picket yanked from the hotel fence, mounted him on guard under the window. The room key was in McCannon's pocket and the clerk was

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sympathetic, so they rode over to the bank.

There was a street light in front of the bank, but it was not lighted. From across the street young Kindall spoke to them from a large car drawn up at the curb. "Meet Mr. Swanson, the cashier," he invited. "He's in on the secret."

Doggy, looking around the gloomy surroundings, asked how many they figured were in the gang. "Fifteen," answered the cashier promptly. "They've got machine guns, too, so I'm told."

"That only leaves a mere twelve to be handled," said Pedros dourly. "We already got three of 'em."

"What!" gasped the bank officials.

McCannon took over. "Yeah, I got the brain guys locked up at the hotel, and a red-headed gorilla, we caught in the grass, is languishing in the hoosegow!"

Young Mr. Kindall suddenly choked on an outburst of mirth. "Oh, how droll, Swanson!" he chortled. "Excellent work, boys. Super-excellent!"

With his coat spread to shield a flashlight, the young man worked at the bank door, and the four went in. "It's only fair to tell you," he said, "that we've been forced to make minor changes in our plans."

The cashier, who carried a weighty satchel, went to the vault which was in the rear of the building. "You better go back to the lobby and lie on the floor," he told them. "I'm going to check up on that money, and see if it's all right. That's a lot of dough!"

AFTER about fifteen minutes he came to the lobby, and laid down with them. "That's the first time my memory ever failed me, Mr. Kindall," he apologized, "I've plumb forgot the combination!"

"Tut-tut, Mr. Swanson!" snapped young Kindall, and seemed to be peeved. "Perhaps I had better try it."

"Please don't, sir!" pleaded the cashier. "In my excitement I tripped the time-lock, and it's running in reverse and, along with it, the operating current. It's liable to do something. Let's lie low and wait!"

They did not have to wait long. There was a muffled, jarring thud, and objects rained down about them from the walls.

"Now you *have* done it, Swanson!" upbraided young Kindall, "I'll wager the door is off that vault, for those twelve gangsters, with machine guns, to march in and remove its contents!"

"Over my dead body they will!" snarled Big Angus valiantly. Doggy, upon whose head had dropped a substantially framed picture of the Confederate War Generals, for purposes of conversation was not present.

Young Kindall sighed. "We can't do it, Officer McCannon! Men of your mettle are too rare to sacrifice! We have only one alternative. We'll rush the money by car over to the Rufusville Bank and stow it there. You and Officer Pedros will convoy us!"

Doggy, coming to, wiped an inquiring hand over a moist lump on the side of his head and sat up. He heard labored breathing as Big Angus and the bank officials staggered past him with bulging sacks, and dizzily followed them to the parked car. "You better draw me a blueprint," he growled, "I like to get down to the facts of things." In a few words the younger man explained his plan. Doggy said, vaguely, and with a hand to his throbbing head, "Have those damned birds *got* to twitter, at this time of night?"

As they started to roll, young Kindall said anxiously, "Don't let anyone stop us, boys, even my uncle would if he knew we were taking this drastic precaution!"

Instantly the birds stopped twitting in Doggy's head. "I thought your *father* was the president of that bank!" he said warily.

"He is," assured the young man hastily, "but so is my uncle. They're twins."

The escort was a wise provision. A helmeted policeman, at the edge of the town, semaphored them down. "You can't speed in Midburg!" he shouted, and Big Angus side-swiped him, with the remark that the Governor could speed anywhere. It was

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purely an instinctive reply, but, coming to think of it, the big car did look like the governor's limousine.

The same excuse worked later when a motorcycle cop, out on the highway, gave them the siren and flashed them to roll into the shoulder. Riding knee-to-knee with him, McCannon growled, "What you mean, slowing up his nibs? You want to go back plowing the sod?"

AT the outskirts of Rufusville the money car honked them down. "This is as far as we'll need you, boys, and we are eternally grateful," young Kindall assured them. "When the pater comes to realize your service, and buzzes the governor, you'll step upward. Goodnight!"

"Sweet dreams to you, sir!" chirped McCannon, "but there's still an item of fifty bucks due the each of us."

"How utterly forgetful of me!" said the younger man, and forked over the money, which Big Angus pocketed.

They arrived back at the hotel, just as the clock was striking ten. "You fools!" grated the clerk, rushing up to them. "That was the Governor and Mr. Kindall, our bank president, you locked in the Governor's room! You made them late for the crowning of the queen!"

"What's all this locking-up business, anyhow?" asked a puzzled bystander. "The chief of police just found Foy, the special bank watchman, locked-up in the town jail!"

"You guys keep mum!" warned McCannon hastily, "We're investigating this very thing. Come on, Doggy, let's roll!"

"Brain guys and muscle guys!" sneered Pedros as they chugged off. "Well, I'll allow you're the muscle guy of this outfit! What the heck can we do, now? Three roads lead out of Rufusville, and we're only two of us!"

Big Angus came to a slithering stop in front of the restaurant and rushed in. "Where's that dizzy blonde you had in here, today?" he demanded of the proprietor.

"Quit tonight, and was paid off. Why?"

"I'll ask the questions. Where did she hang out?"

Possessed of her address they immediately repaired there, arriving not a minute too soon. The trim blonde was loading a suit-case in a low-hung roadster.

With the skill of a rodeo rider, and without stopping, Big Angus scooped her up and planted her between his handle bars. "Come across!" he shouted to her, "Where you going to meet 'em?"

Later he said, "So you won't talk, huh?" and gave the roaring machine more gas. The girl, on her precarious perch, screamed in terror. "We're doing eighty," he yelled at her, "and I'm going to step up to a hundred-and-ten, and rip the hide off you, along with your ears!"

The road was hard-surfaced with clay, and tiny particles of sand and gravel were playing a torturing tattoo on his own cheeks. He knew that the girl in front of him was catching it badly, but he was determined to make her come through.

WHEN his speedometer quit at one hundred, she was still stubbornly holding out and holding on, and then he added a new torment to her shattered nerves. Opening up his siren he sent the hurtling machine zigzagging from side to side of the road, barely missing trees and telephone poles in his crazy flight.

"Oh stop, *stop!*" she moaned, "I'll tell you!"

Down to a comparative crawl of seventy-five miles, he heard her story. The gang, headed by one "English Steve" Rosco, whose moll she was, had planted her in Midburg, some weeks before, to get the lay of the little bank, which handled large consignments of cash during the tobacco selling season. Rosco, who had passed himself off to McCannon and Pedros, as the son of the bank president, was the brains of the gang, whose only other member was a safecracker named Bolt. The car the two were driving was a hot short, and they were to meet at the brow of a hill, just beyond Rufusville, and transfer the loot to her car. At that point she trailed off into

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a vicious tirade against a flat tire that had delayed her getaway.

They rolled through sleeping Rufusville and approached the hilltop, where the rendezvous was planned. Riding side by side, with the width of a car between their headlights, they took the climb slowly and stopped, with neat timing, just short of the brow. McCannon took the slim neck of the girl between vice-like thumb and forefinger. "You'll say nothing more or less than what I tell you to," he growled ferociously, "or I'll punch your head off!"

Again with perfect timing, the two patrolmen blinked their lights three times, and an answering honk came from near the top of the hill. "Tell 'em to come meet you, you're scared," ordered Big Angus, and the girl repeated the message in a shrill voice.

They put out the lights and stepped to the side of the road, and the capture that followed was tamely routine. With their prisoners bound in the big car, and their motorcycles lashed to the top with a tow rope, they rolled back to Midburg, satisfied with the results, but disappointed at the flabby climax.

The crowning ceremony being over, they found the governor at the hotel, in company with the irate bank president. "So, there you are!" roared their boss, as they marched in with their catch. "I suppose you've been playing your drunken lock-up pranks on some more harmless citizens!"

"These are the Rosco bankrobbing gang," said Big Angus, calmly, "and here's the swag from the Midburg Bank, and if we hadn't locked up Mr. Kindall with you for safekeeping he might now be being held for heavy ransom."

The bank watchman whom they had overcome in the grass, sneered at them, "I s'pose you threw *me* in jail to keep me from being held for heavy ransom, also, huh?"

"Nuh-huh, a more dire fate was to be yours, my fine friend. *You* was to be *bumped!*" That settled the watchman, who left with chattering teeth.

"You—you mean my bank was robbed?" gasped the president, and his knees buckled and dropped him to the floor.

"They didn't leave a postage stamp," McCannon assured him. "When I first suspected this dizzy dame down at the restaurant, and saw her talking to this Rosco, who, naturally, I knew from his pictures in the gallery, I wised-up Doggy here, and we lay for 'em, but they changed time on us, and got as far as beyond Rufusville, before we overtook 'em in hand-to-hand conflict." His eyes wandered to the trickle of blood on the side of Doggy's head, where the Confederate Generals had crowned him, and was further inspired. "Doggy, here, wasn't much good," he concluded, "on account of a crack he got on the head early in the fight, but he did the best he could—for a little fellow."

MR. KINDALL got up, deeply moved. "Governor," he exploded pompously, "these men are heroes, suh! I want your permission to reward them!"

"Why, certainly, Kindall, only my policemen are expected always to do their duty."

"That was beyond duty! Here, my brave fellows, is a five dollar note each!"

"We couldn't think of taking it, sir," said Big Angus, winking at Doggy, before lowering his eyes modestly.

"In fact, so substantial a reward would spoil them," said the Governor, drily, "besides setting a bad precedent for the rest of the force. There's a possibility that this Rosco person may carry a price on his head, and that should be sufficient for them."

"I'm sorry, boys, I don't!" contributed the dapper prisoner, with malicious satisfaction.

In the comparative privacy of a beer parlor, McCannon said, "What was his lousy five-spots compared with that duty-before-profit front I threw for the Gov'nor's benefit? We got a robust fifty-five dollars per each, ain't we?"

"That girl was right, today," remarked Doggy, musingly

"Meaning what?"

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"About you not being able to count over three. Those was also fifty-dollar bills that bird gave you, in that first hand-out."

"I meant to tell you about that," soothed Big Angus, "but, in the poor guy's excitement, and probably thinking he really was the son of old Kindall, for the moment, he slipped me only five dollar bills that first time, and I didn't have the heart to tell him. Of course he was correct in that last pay-off, so, you see, that makes it fifty-five each."

"Maybe," sighed Doggy. "I'm told I flunked on math at Oxford in my youth, but, if I recall correctly—and that mirror didn't mislead me—there was another fifty passed from hand to glove, for overhead and etcetera, and there would appear to be something wrong with your division."

"Aw, I was talking about what we could divide at the moment. Naturally, I don't tote any twenty-five dollars in loose change."

"Naturally not. Will you let me hold one of 'em half-centuries, Big Angus?"

"No tricks, now, Doggy!" warned McCannon, complying.

"It's always been fifty-fifty, pal. I was just wondering if 'em fifties, he was handing out so freely, was on the up-and-up, that's all."

"You mean maybe *counterfeits*, Doggy?" asked McCannon, growing pale.

Pedros studied the note carefully. "Just like I thought," he finally said. "It's got Grant's head on it, and that makes it queer. Lemme hold the rest of 'em! Yes, sir, they all got Mr. Grant's head on 'em, and mustn't *his* face be red!"

"Gee," gulped McCannon. "Counterfeits are hot all the time, no matter who's got 'em!"

"And besides," added Doggy, "we wouldn't want to be no laughing stocks, if this thing comes out in court. Since we can't spend 'em, and don't dare keep 'em, there's only one thing to be done!"

"And that *tout* damn *suite!*" agreed Big Angus, visibly worried. "Nuh-huh! Don't pass 'em back on *me!*"

Doggy paid for the beer, and excused himself for a few minutes. He went out the back door and legged it over to the hotel. Even with the recovered bank-funds locked in the hotel safe, and guarded by the grim-faced police force of Midburg, banker Kindall was still too excited to sleep. Doggy found him in conversation with the governor.

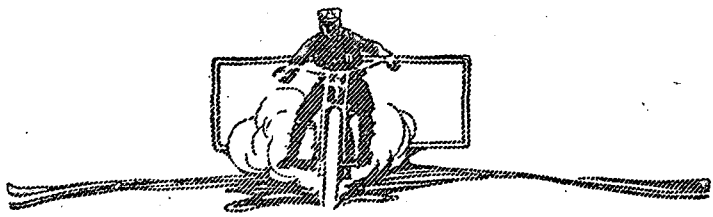
"Excuse me, Mister Kindall, but ain't this a genuine fifty-dollar note?" he interrupted politely.

The banker gave it professional scrutiny. "Why certainly. It carries Grant's picture, series of 1928."

"That's what I figured," sighed Doggy, burying it, along with its four fellows, deep in a corner of his thin wallet.

The Governor snapped at him, "Where did you get that money, Pedros?"

"Aw, I just won it in a guessing game," answered Doggy, guilelessly.



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MEN
Back From Spain
THE STORY OF HIS ADVENTUROUS CAREER WOULD FILL A BOOK. THIS FIERY TEXAN, A FIRST CLASS FIGHTING ACE, HAS PLUMMETED THROUGH 3 WARS, HAD A PRICE PUT ON HIS HEAD, HAS BEEN SHOT DOWN 4 TIMES, AND STILL HAS A WHOLE SKIN.
A PRICE ON HIS HEAD!
MAJOR FREDERICK LORD
WITH THE BRITISH ROYAL FLYING CORPS
"FREDDIE" WAS IN 80 AERIAL BATTLES. HE WAS TWICE SHOT DOWN BUT HE DOWNED 22 PLANES AND ONE BALLOON HIMSELF! HIS SQUADRON WAS IN SUCH THICK FIGHTING THAT IN ONE PERIOD OF 10 DAYS THE ENTIRE GROUP WAS WIPED OUT WITH THE EXCEPTION OF LORD AND ONE OTHER PILOT!
OVER LONDON HE ATTACKED, SINGLE HANDED, 20 ENEMY PLANES, SHOT TWO DOWN AND RAISED SUCH A DISTURBANCE THAT HE SOON HAD ASSISTANCE FROM COMRADES AND DROVE OFF THE REST! (FROM LONDON GAZETTE, NOV. 1918)

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
AFTER THE WORLD WAR LORD FLEW AGAINST THE BOLSHEVIKS IN NORTHERN RUSSIA AND WAS SO DAMAGING TO THEM THAT THE REDS PUT A PRICE OF 75,000 RUBLES ON HIS HEAD!
IN THE PINEGA RIVER, A GUNBOAT WAS FIRING ON THE TOWN OF PINEGA. LORD DOVE WITHIN 100 FEET OF IT 3 TIMES AND ON THE THIRD DIVE SUNK IT! HIS PLANE WAS SO BADLY HIT IT WAS BEYOND REPAIR!
PROTECTING A RETREAT OF THE WHITE RUSSIAN ARMY, HE WAS SHOT DOWN. CLOSELY PURSUED, HE PLUNGED THROUGH SWAMPS FOR 3 DAYS, LIVING ON BERRIES.
ONCE, A FORCE OF REDS WAS APPROACHING PINEGA. THE MAJOR WAS OUT OF AMMUNITION, SO HE LOADED UP HIS PLANE WITH EMPTY WHISKEY BOTTLES! USING THESE AS BOMBS HE SO DEMORALIZED THE REDS THAT THEIR ATTACK FAILED!
"THE HARDEST PART ABOUT FIGHTING IN SPAIN IS COLLECTING YOUR PAY," SAYS MAJOR LORD. THAT'S WHY HE'S BACK IN THE U.S.
IN SPAIN RECENTLY, LORD GAINED FAME BY FLYING AN ANCIENT BOMBER OVER THE SAN SEBASTIAN AIR-DROME AND DESTROYING 12 HIGH-SPEED PLANES OF THE REBELS ON THE GROUND! HE MADE SOME STARTLING OBSERVATIONS WHILE IN SPAIN WHICH ARE BEING STUDIED BY ARMY FORCES TODAY. ONE WAS THAT THE NEW HIGH-SPEED PLANES FLEW TOO FAST TO BE EFFECTIVE. ANOTHER WAS THAT THE NEW BOMBING PLANES WOULD REQUIRE YEARS TO WRECK A LARGE CITY.

Coming Soon: Bill Quaine—Story-Book Detective

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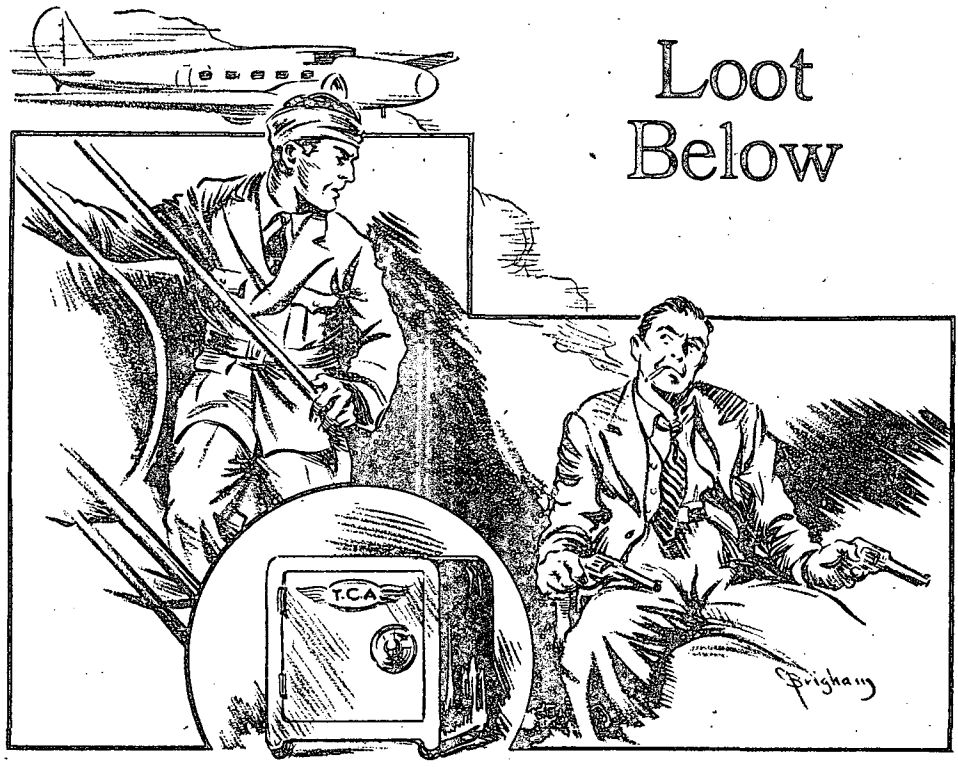
Loot Below



By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

THE *European Cruiser,* built by Trans-Caribbean Airways as the first unit in their trans-Atlantic service, has been sent on a test cruise on the line's Miami-Buenos Aires run. She carries passengers, mail and a full crew. Consternation strikes the Trans-Caribbean system when, off the South American coast, the *Cruiser* fails to report her noon position. At the same time, in New York, Alexander Jarratt, president of the line, receives a phone call. "If you want to see your cruiser again," a voice says, "it will cost you two million dollars."

ABOARD the luxurious *Cruiser,* four men, trained like a ballet team, have taken control. They have killed Captain MacFarland and all but two members of his crew—Toby Bronson, purser, and Williams, a pilot. Voss, leader of the air-pirates, orders the course changed. The giant plane heels and heads east into the South Atlantic wastes. . . . Aboard are Rosita Alvarez, sultry mysterious beauty who is known to Voss, as she was to Captain MacFarland. She is playing some deep game of intrigue and aboard the *Cruiser* her prey seems to be a Naval attaché, Halsey, from whom she has stolen an envelope containing secret documents. Also aboard is Ann Hall, spoiled heiress, and an insidious gentleman by the name of J. Hamilton Crouch.

JARRATT, president of Trans-Caribbean, has decided to pay the two million dollars. When he makes this decision known, someone phones Garland, manager of the Miami terminal, and tells him to drive along the Tamiami Trail in a small truck with the money. On the trail Garland and a chief pilot, Ray Hewett, are accosted by a Florida cracker in an old Ford. He takes the suitcases full of money from them and drives off into the swamp. A moment later he is seated in a seaplane with two accomplices who call him "Chief." He removes the disguise he has been wearing. "It's taken me a year and a hundred grand to pull this," he says, as the plane roars off, east, after the clipper.

Back on land, officials of Trans-Caribbean confidently await word from the ransomed *Cruiser.* But the Chief is mulling over other plans.

This serial began in the Argosy for December 11

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CHAPTER XI

NOSES FOR NEWS

NEWSPAPERMEN herded in the anteroom of the public relations representative of Trans-Caribbean Airways, in Miami. Reporters of the three Miami papers were there, and men from each of the big syndicates. They had asked to see the Division Manager, and the Chief Pilot, and the Operations Manager, but in every case they had been referred to the publicity man. And after a while he came out. He was smiling, but the muscles of his face had double-crossed him. He was a very worried man—and he showed it.

"Hello, boys," he said, and called most of them by their first names. "What's on your minds?"

"Don't give us the old run-around, Jim," said the man from the Associated Press. "What about the *European Cruiser?*"

"She had trouble with the port engines," said Mr. Curry, with an air of the utmost frankness. "She made an easy landing on the sea midway between Trinidad and the mouth of the Orinoco, and her flight engineer is making adjustments. We expect her to take off any minute and finish her flight."

The reporters looked at one another with frank skepticism.

"Things get around," said the man from the *Miami Courier.*

"What things get around?" Mr. Curry demanded.

"Well, we hear talk about a lot of money, a million or two, being suddenly drawn out of one of the Miami banks. We hear that Garland and Hewett drove off with it in a Trans-Caribbean truck."

Mr. Curry shrugged. "Run the story if you like," he said with elaborate carelessness. "But let me remind you of something: if it damages our reputation, it won't be hard for us to prove it in court. If, for instance, a story hinting things like that should endanger our concession for transatlantic service, a libel action wouldn't be more than ten minutes away from your publisher's nose. If you can verify your tip and draw the proper conclusions, run it, but if your boss is sensitive about libel suits—and you care for your jobs—watch your step."

The man from the U.P. gave him a hard look. "You wouldn't be threatening us, would you, Jim?" he asked, softly.

"Why would I threaten you?" Mr. Curry retorted.

"Let's put it another way," purred the representative of the *Miami Independent.* "This is a flight the whole world is watching, because it's the first passenger hop of the *European Cruiser.* That makes it news. You've a list of passengers that looks like pages torn out of *Who's Who* and the *Social Register.* We've heard from our Washington correspondents that Commander Halsey is aboard. And the tip is out that Halsey is bringing home a report of Nazi infiltration into the Argentine that will burn the State Department to a bright blue cinder. On top of that, we got a red-hot tip from an amateur radio man down in Coconut Groves that your operators here have been jamming the air—especially around noon—trying to get in touch with the *Cruiser.* He listened in and we know you couldn't raise the *Cruiser*—and haven't raised her yet. Why don't you come clean? Haven't we always played square with you?"

"You have," said the publicity man in a dead voice. "But exactly what is the story you want to break?"

"Quit stalling, Jim," said the U.P. representative. "Your whole place is in a dither. I can feel it without seeing it. There's a big story here. Better give it to us the way you want it before we have to break it the way we find it. The world's biggest airship disappeared! A passenger list like that on the Titanic and Lusitania, only smaller! And a mysterious bunch of money so big that the three leading Miami banks had to work together to assemble it in the denominations you called for. And yet you ask what story!"

Mr. Curry took a deep breath. "The *European Cruiser,*" he said, levelly, "had engine trouble and made a landing to fix

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it. If you'll come back in a few hours, I think we'll be able to show you a report from her and—"

"Nuts!" said the A.P. man in a disgusted voice. "We'll dig the story up for ourselves!"

"Come back in a few hours?" echoed the man from the *Independent*. "We're not going any farther away from the air terminal than you could throw a freight train."

And out they all trooped.

"Miss Grayson," the publicity man said in a tired voice as his secretary came into the room, "send an office boy out to buy every edition of the afternoon papers, just as fast as they're off the press."

Then, reluctantly, he picked up the telephone to warn the New York office that the cat was at least head and shoulders out of the bag.

TOBY BRONSON gave J. Hamilton Crouch a hard look. "How did you get that door unlocked?" he demanded. "Didn't the steward lock it again when he gave you your lunch?"

"It happened," said Mr. Crouch, his smiling lips contrasting horribly with the dark hatred in his eyes, "that I had a key which fitted it."

Toby Bronson dropped Ann's arm. He shouldered past Crouch's heavy figure, slid his hand around the edge of the door and jerked a key from the inside of the lock. Crouch grabbed for his arm and got his hand around Toby's wrist. But without seeming effort, the young purser twisted his arm out of the other's grasp and slipped the key into the side pocket of his blue uniform coat.

He stood there, angry-faced.

"We have enough trouble here," he told Mr. Crouch, coldly, "without you helling around and getting those gunmen all upset. Besides, your estate might sue the company if you get yourself killed."

The passenger seemed to be having trouble getting his breath. He panted asthmatically as his small eyes swiveled unpleasantly from Ann Hall to the purser. Then, suddenly, he was calm.

"Look, young man," he said, "I've been around. On the China Seas I was on a British ship that was captured by pirates from Bias Bay. Of all the white officers and passengers, I am the only one who is still alive. I have seen uppity youngsters before, who didn't know more than to be impudent to their betters." He bent a cold and disapproving stare upon the girl. "Ann," he said crisply. "Please go to your room."

After what had happened since 11:30, Toby thought he never could be surprised by anything. But he was surprised now. Oh, he had known that these two had been acquainted when they had come aboard at Buenos Aires. Although the girl had eaten all her meals in her compartment, he had seen her speak twice to Mr. Crouch —and there was, of course, the affair of the night before, when they had gone sightseeing in Belem and had not returned to the hotel until almost time to be called for the early-morning take-off. But that this fat, oily fellow was able to say, "Go to your room," in a commanding tone put a new complexion on the affair. Toby turned to look at the girl and her face was as white as paper.

"Did he say," Toby murmured drily, "what I thought he said?"

"I guess he did," Ann Hall said, carefully avoiding his gaze. She pulled her slim figure away and took a single step toward her compartment. A single step only. Then Toby's hand had found her arm, and dragged her to a stop.

"Wait," he said, not looking at her, but at J. Hamilton Crouch. "Wait, and I'll go along with you."

Crouch's fat smile disappeared like a crease in a lump of jelly. A red glint appeared far behind his blue eyes and suddenly Toby Bronson became aware that this man was dangerous. But Toby was too young, too inexperienced in violence, to heed that faint warning.

"And back into that room of yours, mister," he said to Crouch.

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He put the flat of his big hand against Crouch's chest and pushed. He did not intend to push hard, but the man's heavy figure bounced rearward as if he had been struck by a locomotive. Calmly Toby closed the door and steered Ann Hall aft along the passageway.

"How come," he said, irritably, "he has the right to order you around like that? And you were going to do what he told you, too!"

She did not look up. Her dark, fragrant head came only as high as his shoulder, and he suddenly felt very big, very strong, very masculine. He forgot that Ann Hall was reputed to be one of the richest girls in America; all he could remember now was that she was a girl, small, and lovely to look at, and very much needing protection.

Her reply was so low he had to bend his head to hear it.

"I suppose," she murmured, "it's because I'm to marry him as soon as we get back to New York."

"What did you do?" he demanded, entirely incredulous. "Did you lose a bet?"

"No," she said, tonelessly, "I just made a promise."

"And that," he said slowly, "is why you wanted to go ashore at Trinidad—and not have anybody know it!"

FOR an instant her old air of arrogance came to the surface. "Is it part of your duty," she demanded, "to pry into your passengers' private affairs?"

But when Toby made no answer she broke. The door to her compartment was only half a dozen steps ahead. Toby heard a strangled sob and she began to run toward that door. She fumbled blindly for the knob and in the end he had to open the door for her. He stood just within the threshhold, holding the door steady against the easy rocking of the plane. He felt helpless, a little embarrassed, as Ann Hall sank into one of the deep chairs, put her face in her hands and cried as he had never before seen a girl cry. He walked over to her and put his hand clumsily upon her shoulder, which shook convulsively as she tried to choke down her sobs. And this, he told himself, incredulously, was the girl who had been so snooty that he had complained to Captain MacFarland about her! What terrible thing—apart from the catastrophe which had struck the plane—could possibly be hanging over this millionaire's daughter to so break her pride? He had always thought that the possession of immense wealth was a cushion against the unpleasantnesses of life, but certainly Ann Hall's money was not protecting her from something that was more than she could bear.

Toby tried to think of some encouragement he could give her, but the only thing he could think of was to offer to go back and sock Crouch. And maybe she didn't want him socked. After all, she was going to marry him, wasn't she? If she could stand him, Toby told himself, she could stand anything. Yet here she was, crying as if her world had come to an end.

"There, there," Toby said, helplessly, patting her shoulder with a gentle hand. And suddenly his own awkwardness made him furious at himself—at everything—at Ann Hall, even. "Will you stop that bawling!" he roared at her. "Stop it or I'll smack you."

He heard her catch her breath. Her convulsive crying came to an abrupt stop. She lifted her tear-streaked face and stared up at him.

"Did I—I hear you—say you'd smack me?" she asked in a tight voice.

Looking straight down into her violet eyes, a sudden electric thrill ran through Toby. The next thing he did was entirely spontaneous. He did not think about it. He just did it. He bent over and kissed her full upon the lips. And then he straightened up.

"You bet—I said I'd smack you," he said, shakily. "Now behave yourself while I see to a few things. I'll be coming back."

And out he went, his course to the door a trifle irregular, as if he had just taken three highballs, and each one of them much too strong.

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Four or five steps he took and then saw the steward hurrying up the passageway.

"*Señor,*" Segurdo said, breathlessly, "they want you on the bridge. They just passed word down to that Roope, and he sent me to tell you."

For a moment Toby stood still, considering the possibilities of that order. Shrewdly he was able to guess that they would want him to open the safe. But it did not enter his mind that they might be able to force him to do just that. It was possible, he thought, that they might knock him around a bit, and in his present condition the possibility was uninviting. He had been knocked around all he cared about for one day.

But what was the alternative? Certainly there was no hiding place where they could not search him out and just as certainly their tempers would not be improved in the process. But the fact of the matter was, he had no intention of hiding like a scared rabbit. And more than that; at least, if he went to the bridge he would know just how things were aboard, who was dead, how the bandits were commanding the ship and what, if anything, could be done about it. Perhaps he could steal a word with Williams, who might have some plan for recapturing the *Cruiser.*

He squared his shoulders and nodded. "Okay, Segurdo," he said, "I'll be right up."

"I don't like it," the steward said, doubtfully.

"Well, I'm not crazy about it myself," Toby confessed, "but what else is there to do?"

He did not wait for a reply. He pushed by the small, white-jacketed figure and made his way forward to the bow where, in the doorway of the anchor and gear room, the pale-eyed Roope sat watching him come. Roope was wholly at his ease, his long, thin hands laid loosely across the butts of his two guns, but there was an unwinking fixity to the man's gaze that warned Toby to step carefully and make no mistakes.

Roope hitched his chair out of the way by squeezing his elbows against the chair-arms; his fingers never strayed from the two quiet guns. Nor did the man speak as Toby edged past him into the anchor and gear room and Toby's skin prickled at his nearness, as occasionally one's skin crawls at the nearness of a snake, or perhaps, a spider.

Toby turned and started up the stairs for the bridge. Roope's voice floated up and passed him.

"Purser coming up!"

CHAPTER XII

ORDEAL BY FIRE

CLIMBING those familiar metal stairs it seemed impossible to Toby that he should not, in a moment or two, look up into the calm, smiling faces of Anderson and Williams, or perhaps young Gray. So many times had he seen them sitting there, usually with their arms folded, matter-of-factly watching the instruments and the horizon as the automatic pilot steered the immense ship through the skies.

Instead, as his head came up over the combing, he saw one of the men from compartment B, sitting in Anderson's seat and holding an automatic in his lap. And beside him sat Williams, his face looking like death itself. The Second Pilot's eyes, usually jolly and carefree, seemed to have sunk back into his head, and new, deep lines had etched themselves from the corners of his mouth upward to his nostrils. Since Toby had last seen him, just before the fateful hour of eleven-thirty, young Billy Williams appeared to have aged half a dozen years.

"Well," said the bandit, nastily, "if you've had your look, get inside."

And Williams's head nodded, definitely warning Toby to obey. So Toby moved aft across the duralumin gratings and suddenly his feet slipped out from under him and he almost fell. Instantly the man Dessar swiveled in his seat and his gun pointed straight at Toby's stomach. Recovering his balance, Toby looked down at the floor. There was a great smear of

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darkly-drying blood there, still slippery underfoot. For an instant Toby closed his eyes. Then he took a deep breath and marched on in.

"That'll be close enough," Voss said, inspecting him across the expanse of the chart table. A gun was very close to Voss's hand. It would take three steps to grab it—but by the time he would get there, the gun wouldn't be there.

The man at the radio set slipped his ear phones off and laid them on the ledge. He turned around and his troubled gaze darted quickly from Toby to Voss, and back again.

Voss was watching him, weighing him, with silent fixity, taking his time about this close inspection. Toby felt that cold and hostile gaze go over him, missing nothing, overlooking nothing, until the other had made up his mind. Then, without lifting his voice, Voss said:

"All right, give me the combination of your safe."

"No," Toby said.

He wasn't especially conscious of being heroic. It was all too simple.

Voss's face did not change. "Punk," he said, evenly, "do you think guys who can pull off a stunt like this would stand for a *No* from you? You'd better tell me now because you'll be begging for a chance to tell me if I have to go to work on you. Speak your piece now before you get hurt."

And Nitze, from the radio set burst out: "Tell him, purser! Don't be a fool!"

Toby swallowed hard. "Sorry," he said, unevenly, "but I can't tell you."

"Dessar!" called Voss into his telephone. "Can you leave the bridge? Sure, what could he do? All right, come in."

He put the instrument down and eyed Toby stonily. In a moment Toby heard Dessar's feet tramping in. Voss caught the look on Toby's face. He smiled thinly, took the gun off the table and slid it into his pocket.

"All right, Nitze," he said, "come around here. Dessar, he thinks he isn't going to give us the number of the safe."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Dessar sneered.

OUT of the corner of his eyes Toby saw Dessar's fist coming. He tried to roll his head away and almost made it—almost, but not quite. The blow which would have crashed against his left ear missed and raked up across his temple, tearing the bandage off and knocking him off-balance. But Toby had been knocked off-balance many a time—and still gone on with the pigskin. He took three steps, fast, to one side, pivoted and moved in on Dessar like a whirlwind. He heard Voss coming around the chart table, heard Nitze's scrambling progress behind the leader. And the next thing he heard was his own right fist slamming home into Dessar's slightly puffy stomach and Dessar's breath exploding out of him. Dessar fell. Toby tried to hurdle him, to make for the bridge and on down to the main deck. He had no idea how he was going to get past Roope, or what he would do when he got there. All he knew was that he wanted to get away. He lifted his left foot to jump over Dessar, but the fallen gunman, cursing horribly, kicked Toby's right foot out from under him.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. He fell on Dessar. Voss reached down and threw his arm around Toby's throat, yanking his chin up and closing down on his windpipe at the same time. Toby reached up and back with his two hands and tried to find the man's face, but he couldn't, and while his entire body was exposed, Dessar slugged him twice. The blows were low, deliberately, and a gasp of pure agony came from Toby's panting lips. That arm was choking him, breaking his neck. Oh, Toby had been hurt before—in football games, in class rushes. He could take it. He knew that after a while your body becomes so numb that nothing hurts very much. But never before had he been hurt like this. Never before had he been in a fight where gouging, kneeing, maiming, were as much a part of defense and offense as an uppercut or a straight left to the jaw.

The throttling arm tightened. A fist, swinging around, found his jaw. And Des-

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sar continued to deliver those paralyzing low punches which caused Toby's knees to buckle, the strength to flow out of all his muscles. Someone got a thumb in his ear; the thing seemed to probe into the inner recesses of his brain and the lancing pain was unbearable. He exploded into action and threw off everybody, everything, all but that throttling arm, which hung on, its owner dragging along with it.

Dimly he saw Williams stampeding into the navigation room, his face working. He had left the ship to the mechanical mercies of the automatic pilot. But a blurred figure—Toby thought it was the engineer—stepped to meet him and held a gun steadily pointed at him. The man was saying something that was lost in the maelstrom of violence that was encompassing Toby.

Two arms surrounded Toby's legs. Toby yanked his left leg loose and kicked the man in the face. The arms went away. The arms around his legs, that was. The forearm that was choking off his breath—forcing his chin up and his head back—that remained where it was. And it was doing the job, all right. Toby's lungs were starving for air. His mouth was open and in his own ears he could hear the raw scrape of his breath as he tried to drag it in through his constricted windpipe. He drove his elbows into somebody's stomach and heard a groan, but the arm did not go away from his throat.

He was on his knees, not remembering how he got there. Now he was fighting only with his final grim instincts, just flaying out with his knees, elbows and fists automatically, realizing that he was choking, strangling, and that they had him licked. He could not imagine why he was now hitting someone who did not feel his blows. He knew his arms were tired, knew that everything was dissolving into a gray blur. Sparks were zipping through his brain and into his eyeballs. His lungs were bursting.

And then, suddenly, he realized that it was all over. Somebody was holding his two wrists and saying;

"Nitze, that piece of cord over there."

THE forearm that was choking him relaxed just a tiny bit. Enough for his blazing lungs to get a tiny portion of air, but not enough to give him strength. He felt something bite into his wrists, into his ankles, and then the arm went away. For some moments he lay there, face down on the metal floor, while his tortured lungs dragged deep gulps of air which burned as it flowed past his throat.

He heard a voice which he vaguely recognized as belonging to Voss. It said, quietly: "Tell that pilot I can fly this ship better than he can. Tell him if he leaves his seat again you'll blow his whole face in."

Arms picked Toby up and slammed him on the chart table. Someone wound several loops of rope around his stomach and when he arched his back and tried to roll off the table, he found he could move less than an inch. Now, with returning breath, things that had been dim and blurred were again becoming clear. Every bone, every muscle in him set up its own individual cry of pain. But he could see. And, after a fashion, he could think.

Voss was standing over him on one side, Dessar on the other. And behind Voss was Nitze, regarding him with troubled eyes. The only really familiar thing in the world was the background of muffled thunder of the engines and the slow, easy motion of the plane in the air. Everything else was nightmare.

"You'll give me the combination of the safe, now," Voss said, a little breathlessly.

Toby's throat hurt too much to speak. So he just shook his head.

And in that same conversational voice Voss said; "Dessar, take off his shoes."

Toby felt hands tugging at his shoes, felt the shoes slip off, felt someone peeling off his socks. He surged against his lashings, but it didn't do any good. Whoever tied those knots knew what he was doing. With every heave of his body they became tighter and tighter until they bit deeply into his flesh.

"Look, punk," Voss said, patiently, "we can open that can with a cold chisel, but

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it will take time. It'll be a nuisance. You will tell us the combination pretty soon. When you smell your own flesh burning you'll be yelling out that combination. Don't you want to save yourself that agony?"

None of this, Toby told himself, could be true. Things like this just did not happen. Especially on Trans-Caribbean ships they did not happen. In China, maybe, or to gangsters in New York and Chicago, but not to him, nor to people he knew. He simply did not believe that they would do this thing to him.

He saw Voss move out of his range of vision as the man stepped sidewise downward toward his feet. Now he could see, only Dessar, who was staring down at him with a curious intentness, an eagerness, even. And he could see Nitze, who was not looking down at him, but was moving his rounded eyes toward Voss. Nitze's mouth was jerking and sweat was running down his face in small, shining globules.

Then, sharply through the rumble of the engines, Toby heard the metallic click of a cigar lighter. And a moment later a blaze of pain started at the sole of his right foot, ran up his leg and struck him shockingly in the pit of his stomach. He jerked his right leg instinctively, but lashings snubbed him short. He gritted his teeth, but a deep moan struggled to his lips, burst through. Once again that flame seared the bottom of his foot. It was as if someone were pouring white hot mercury into his foot and it was flowing, bubbling, smoking, through all the veins of his leg and into his body.

"Enough?" Voss inquired in an interested voice.

TOBY found himself astonished that his heart did not stop beating; that he did not die at once of the pain. He felt the small blaze again lick at the tender skin of his foot and this time, curiously, it did not hurt so much. His leg jerked as of its own volition; it seemed to him that he had nothing to do with it. He was no longer conscious of a sharp sensation of shock; the pain was steady now, as was the ache in his head, and in all the muscles of his body. He had a strange floating feeling, as if his whole frame had wafted itself upward from the chart table, like a magician's trick on the stage.

"Enough?" came Voss's voice from a great, great distance.

Toby found himself interested in Nitze's face. It was bending over him and it seemed all eyes. Nitze's skin was so white the veins stood out like red worms. He looked as if it were his own flesh he could smell cooking, instead of that belonging to somebody else.

A great lassitude came over Toby. He knew that if, or when, he got his strength back he would kill Voss if it were the last thing he did in this life—which it probably would be. But he would kill him if he had to hunt for him all his life, if he had to shoot him down in the middle of Times Square and die for it in the electric chair at Sing Sing. He could taste that craving for vengeance on his tongue—or was it salt blood, caused by biting his lips in an effort not to cry out?

Thinly, to his dulling ears, came Nitze's sudden cry: "Stop it, Boss, will you! It makes me sick!"

All the sensations of pain had diminished and Toby's mind was so dimmed that he could not even be amused because one of the bandits couldn't stand it—while he could. And then it seemed as if he were floating off into infinity, where there was no pain at all, only peace and darkness, and a vague longing to do something terrible to somebody—he couldn't even remember who. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

CRUISER IN THE SEA

HUGO VOSS, octant in hand, hurried down the stairway from the navigation turret. He threw one careless look around the room, then came to a full stop, every nerve and muscle tense. He stared at the empty chair before the radio set,

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then at the empty corner where floor and rear bulkhead met. Then, in three long strides, he was at the door of the bridge.

"Dessar!" he cracked. "Where's Nitze?"

Both Dessar and Williams looked up at him.

"He carried the purser below," Dessar said with some astonishment. "Didn't you tell him to do—" His words were cut off. He bent his head forward, looking at the companionway which led down to the anchor and gear room. "Here he comes now," he said, in a relieved voice.

Voss said nothing at all as the engineer's head and shoulders appeared above the deck. He just looked at Nitze, and Nitze returned his flat stare with a curious mixture of challenge and alarm. Nitze straightened up and began to walk toward the navigation room. And then Voss spoke. His words were not, apparently, what the engineer expected.

"This is where we sit down," the leader said. "Nitze, get back to your throttles."

A long and gusty sigh ran out of the engineer. He increased his pace and disappeared through the door into the bigger room.

"All right, pilot," Voss snapped. "Sit her down."

Williams was small and tough and wiry. He had the build and the looks and the disposition of a lightweight boxer. And now his mind was in a turmoil. He had seen Anderson killed beside him. He knew that most of the crew, including Captain MacFarland, had been killed. And a few minutes ago he had been almost torn to pieces trying to decide which was more important—to try to rescue Toby Bronson, or to continue his watch over the lives of forty-odd passengers. And in the end three men with guns had won. They had driven him back to his seat behind the wheel, where he had sat in aching misery while they had done things to Toby Bronson. He hadn't known what they were doing until Nitze had carried the unconscious purser below. One look at Toby's bare right foot had turned Billy Williams's stomach and he had almost leaped out of his seat to run amuck there on the bridge and in the navigation room. But the habit of discipline was strong in him, bred bone-deep in him by three years as a naval aviator and two more in the service of Trans-Caribbean. He was on watch behind the wheel, and nothing—battle, murder or sudden death—could move him until he was relieved. And yet he had moved, at the first sound of Toby's groan. It had taken guns, to drive him back.

"Did you hear me?" Voss inquired, pleasantly. "Put her down, right now!"

Billy Williams turned his desperate eyes all around the horizon. But it was as it had been for hours, an endless expanse of empty blue sea. It seemed as if there were no vessels left in the entire world.

Something cold and hard and round pressed into the back of Billy Williams's skull.

"I was flying boats while you were in short pants," came Voss's implacable voice. "Put her down or I'll give it to you. I can land her all right."

With desolation in his heart, Billy Williams bent over and slapped the switch which cut off the automatic pilot. Now he was controlling the mammoth ship with his own hands and feet. He picked up the phone and hung the loop over his neck.

"Cut to a thousand revolutions, all engines," he said.

And he was somewhat comforted by the instant response that snapped back in clipped, businesslike tones.

"Cut to a thousand, all engines," came Nitze's voice through the phones.

And immediately the tremendous roar of the motors diminished in volume. He pressed against the wheel and the boat-shaped bow of the big plane dipped. Anxiously he watched his rate-of-climb indicator, his airspeed dial and his altimeter. His eyes darted downward to the corrugated surface of the sea as he tried to judge the height of the waves down there. Putting an 86,000-pound boat down, even on a calm sea, required steady nerves, steady hands, a sense of distance as exact as a micrometer—and endless hours of practice.

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And on a rough sea, even the expert hands of Captain MacFarland sometimes shook when the landing was over and the immense hull was safely glued to the water. But these seas did not look high. Surface chop, mostly; it was the long ground swells that were dangerous.

At a thousand feet he ordered the revolutions cut again, and the pointers on the tachometers dropped almost before he had gotten the orders out of his mouth. At two hundred feet he called for idling speed. The leashed thunder of the engines dropped to a murmur. A minute later he leveled out. A great load lifted from his heart as he appraised the height of the waves. Nothing there to worry about. They might have caused trouble for a small pursuit seaplane, but not for this immense flying-boat. Nevertheless, he held his breath as he felt the great hull sag under him, felt the controls grow sloppy in his hands. He pulled the wheel back into his lap, holding her off as long as he could. And he did not dare breathe again until the long V-shaped keel smacked the top of the first wave, skipped over the second, smashed through the third, fourth and fifth, came to a stop as it lost flying speed and plowed like a surface vessel through all the waves that followed.

Then, and not until then, the man who had been standing behind him spoke.

"Desser," Voss said, "go down to the anchor and gear room. Break out one of those new-fangled folding anchors. A light one will do us now. You'll need about three hundred fathoms of line here. Snap into it."

WILLIAMS let his large, calloused hands fall limply onto his knees. He did not want the bandits to see how they were shaking. It seemed to him that the end of the world had come. Here the great ship was, at a guess, three hundred miles due east of anything at all, and down on the surface of the sea. So what now? Somehow it did not seem right that he should be alive and all those others dead. But what could he have done? Somebody had to keep the ship in the air so the passengers might live. It was all right for Dessar and Voss to say they could fly big ships, but out of nearly two hundred pilots in Trans-Caribbean service, there were up to now only a thin handful of men qualified to fly the *Cruiser*. And now, he thought with growing horror, three of those were dead, and he, the fourth, would probably be dead before long.

If he had gone charging around the navigation room, he told himself, these bandits would have shot him down with no compunction at all. And what, then, of the passengers? He could see, in the eyes of his mind, the immense plane whirling down in a tailspin with all those passengers—including the dark-eyed, lovely, unpredictable Rosita. Thinking of her, he gritted his teeth together. Maybe it would have been a good thing if she had died and let her soul—if she had one, which he doubted—go whirling off to whatever hell awaited beautiful girls who could take a man's heart in their slim hands and squeeze it dry. But even as that thought ran through him, he knew that he loved her and would continue to love her until he died. Even if, in the meantime, he took her sweet neck between his fingers and snapped it like a pipe stem.

If only he and she had been in the plane, Billy Williams assured himself that he would have pulled it up into a stall, let it fall off and then sit still while it spun down and down into a crash which would have fixed everything, permanently, for both of them. And to make the situation perfect, that red-necked louse, Commander Halsey, would be aboard, too.

The rounded hatch in the extreme bow swung open. Dessar's head appeared in the opening beside the mooring post which slid into sight with the lifting of the hatch. He unfolded the spike-ended flukes of a hundred-pound Northill anchor and pushed it overboard. He payed out a seemingly endless length of line, then snubbed the bitter end to the mooring post.

"Secure your engines," Voss said.

Automatically Billy Williams gave the

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order into the phone. One by one the big motors in the wing ceased to kick over. The plane moved sluggishly, heavily, as she drifted back to then end of the anchor line and then weathervaned into the wind.

Dessar returned to the bridge.

"Take this turkey below," Voss commanded, jerking his heavy chin toward Williams. "He looks like he might try to get tough. If he does, don't bother with him. Just give it to him and we'll let the ship lay out here until they find it, two-three weeks from now."

"Up out of there, guy," Dessar said, pulling a gun out of his pocket and holding it ready. "Let's be going."

In the last few words, Voss had taken the fight out of Billy Williams. So if they killed him, they'd abandon both ship and passengers, would they? That meant they were going to make rendezvous here with somebody and be taken off. The pilot tried to remember where the aircraft carriers were. The *Lexington* and the *Saratoga* were on the coast; that was all he could place. So if he were killed, heaven only knew how long it would be before Trans-Caribbean could find this anchored ship, so far away—and in a direction they'd never expect—from air and ship routes. In a sort of numb silence he eased his short, stocky body out from behind the wheel and went down the stairway ahead of Dessar, sharply conscious that the bandit's gun never wavered from the small of his back.

He turned at the anchor and gear room and went aft, but came to a sudden and complete stop. Standing implacably before him was a slick-haired, pale-eyed young man who stood behind two pointed guns and looked as if he would like nothing better in the world than to empty both of them into Billy Williams's stomach.

"WELL, what am I supposed to do now?" the pilot asked, over his shoulder.

'It's all right, Roope," said Dessar, from behind him. "The boss wants him put in a compartment until we've frisked the passengers. Then we can let him loose so long as he doesn't get by you here at the stairway."

The tight attention in the man Roope's eyes faded, but the guns never drifted far from Williams's midriff.

"Compartment H is all right, I guess," he said. "There's supposed to be two men in there, but one of 'em is always in F with that Spanish dame. So put him there."

"Listen, Roope," said Dessar, "where did Nitze put the purser?"

"I gave the purser a break," said Roope, grinning thinly. "I told the engineer guy to put him in the de luxe compartment where that snooty broad is."

"Oh boy, oh boy," Dessar said, "is Nitze in wrong with the boss!"

"How come?" Roope asked, his washed-out eyes flickering with pale interest.

"We put the heat to the purser's foot so's he'd give us the combination to the safe. But he didn't give. Instead, he passed out cold. You see, we'd had to slap him around a little before we could get him laid out on the table. I'll say this for him, he's got guts. You ought to of seen Nitze. When he smelled the meat cooking, he went over to a corner and tossed his flapjacks! And then, soon as the boss went up to get a navigation sight, Nitze carried the purser down here somewhere and put him to bed. That mug just can't take it."

"I could of told you that a month ago," Roope said indifferently. He turned his head and bawled, "Steward!"

Instantly Segurdo popped out of the galley. His dark eyes met Williams's and although his expression did not change, his direct glance told the pilot that Segurdo was pretty glad someone from the bridge deck was still alive.

"Sure this mug hasn't got a cannon?" Roope asked, hardly moving his thin lips.

"Does the boss ever forget a thing?" Dessar snapped.

"I wouldn't know," Roope said, drily, "but I aim to find out."

He stepped quickly forward, slipped one

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of his guns into his pocket and ran his other hand expertly along Williams's body, from armpits to hips.

"Oke," he said, carelessly. "Steward, show the way to compartment H."

And he resumed his grim watch while Williams followed Segurdo and Dessar followed Williams, along the narrow corridor. The passageway jogged at the dining lounge, so when they had passed through this colorful room, Roope could no longer see them, but Dessar was taking no chances and Williams knew it.

So Toby Bronson had let them cook his foot—and still had not told the combination of the safe, eh? Williams began to revise his opinion of that young man. Until now the pilot had held the nonflying members of the crew in the same casual disrespect always held for the pursers and stewards by the deck officers of a surface vessel. But now he found himself wondering if he could have lain there on the table, keeping his lips tightly closed while they put fire to his foot until he went unconscious. It might be, he told himself, that he was not all alone on this captured ship, so far as taking steps to recapture it were concerned. And for the first time since he realized that all the other bridge officers were dead, a very small ray of hope entered his heart.

SEGURDO led the way along the after end of the passageway. Billy Williams wished he didn't know the layout here so well. With every forward step compartment F was coming closer and closer. He bent his dark head slightly to the left, every nerve tuned to catch the sound of Rosita's unforgettable voice. But when he walked past that door he heard only a man's voice—Halsey's—and blood pounded dizzily in his brain. What was it that ugly-eyed bandit had said back there at the door of the anchor and gear room? Something about a man from compartment H always being in F with the Spanish dame? That would be Halsey and Billy Williams longed to smash his knuckles into Halsey's face. Everything had been fine—no matter what Captain MacFarland had said—until the navy officer had taken his first look at Rosita shortly after coming aboard, and Rosita had taken her first look at him. After that nothing had been the same. Rosita knew all the angles, did she? And she never brought anybody any luck? That's what the skipper had said. And when Billy, his eyes flaming with anger, had suggested that perhaps the captain was himself interested in her, he had thought for a moment that MacFarland was going to knock him down—or try to knock him down, anyway. So what? So nothing. So not a damned thing. Rosita could take her naval attaché and go plumb to hell with him for all Billy Williams cared. And he wouldn't mind at all helping them on the way. Or so he assured himself at the moment.

At the door to compartment H Segurdo took out his key and twisted it in the lock. Tension suddenly came into his figure and he looked curiously down at the keyhole.

"What's the matter?" asked the attentive Dessar. "Can't you open it?"

"Seguramente, señor," said the Cuban, politely. "It is a master key, I have."

But Billy Williams drew his eyebrows together thoughtfully. He saw, distinctly, that Segurdo had found the door unlocked—and that he had not expected to find it that way.

Carefully Billy listened to Dessar's footsteps behind him. If the bandit came close enough, Billy planned to spin around suddenly and stake everything upon one wild grab after his gun. But Dessar was too well trained. He did not come close at all. He was hanging just far enough behind to prevent exactly what Billy had in mind. By the time the pilot could turn and cover those four or five running steps, there would be six slugs chasing themselves through his flesh and bone.

Segurdo twisted the knob and pushed the door wide. He motioned for Billy Williams to enter and as the pilot passed him, Segurdo's whisper came softly to his ears.

"Try nothing—yet—*señor,*" Segurdo warned.

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Williams hesitated just an instant, but Segurdo's persuasive arm urged him in. And just then a heavy-set figure pushed itself out of a modernistic chair by the window. J. Hamilton Crouch came across the floor, his face furious.

"It's about time!" he roared. "What's the idea of locking me in?"

Segurdo's gaze met his flatly.

"Locked, *señor?*" he asked, smoothly.

"Locked, I said," Crouch roared. "And I'm going to complain to the line."

He shouldered his way past Williams and Segurdo. Dessar's voice cracked like a pistol shot.

"Back, you!" he snapped. "In a little while you can ramble around all you like, but stay in there now or I'll put the blast on you!"

Mr. Crouch's little eyes popped wide open. He stared incredulously at the gun. His puttyish face oozed into an expression of undignified alarm.

"Oh, excuse me!" he bleated, and retreated back into the room.

But Williams, mixed up in his mind as he was, happened to be looking straight at the man, and he saw something deeper than fear in those close-set eyes. There were bright red spots in them, and the pupils were big and round, and there was something in that reddish glitter that set his nerves a-crawl. But an instant later Crouch's fat lids had dropped. He collapsed, panting asthmatically into the chair by the window, and he looked so fatly helpless sitting there that the pilot thought he must have been mistaken when he had thought that next to the pale-eyed Roope, this was the most sinister man he had ever met.

The door slammed shut. The key squeaked in the lock. Williams and Mr. Crouch were left entirely alone.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STORY BREAKS

THE electric clock in the operations manager's office indicated that it was four o'clock in Miami. Then, after years and years, the early *Havana Cruiser* roared in, which made it 4:30 to the instant.

"He said two hours," murmured the chief pilot, morosely.

"Two hours from the time we gave him the money," the operations manager corrected him.

Both men looked tired. They had tried to go about their work after returning from the Everglades, but it was no good, so after a while they went into Garland's office and just sat. They called Mike Hennesy, the radio operator on the *European Cruiser's* frequency, ten times in the first hour, then gave that up. If the big ship reported she was again in the air, they would know instantly.

The telephone rang and Garland pounced upon it like a tiger upon a bit of raw meat. But it was only the public relations man who said the newspaper reporters were raising hell, and should he stick to the same story.

The *Panama Cruiser* thundered down to a landing, so that made it 5:15. Ray Hewett, the chief pilot, tried not to look at the operations manager, but he couldn't help it.

"We've been gypped!" he burst out, and leaped to his feet. He strode over to the window and looked down at the big flying boat, a smaller sister to the *European Cruiser*. She was now taxiing toward the landing slip. He winced and turned his eyes away. "That guy got our money. And we've had no report!"

"It was almost three when we gave him the suitcases," said Garland without conviction. "There's still time."

Again the telephone buzzed. Again Garland's arm darted to it. He listened, his face bleak. "Give all those calls to Mr. Curry," he instructed the operator. "That's what we have a public relations man for." Replacing the receiver, he said to Hewett, "They're beginning to come. The calls from friends and relatives asking where's the *Cruiser*. Word must have trickled up from Trinidad that she hasn't arrived. Operator says she's had two long-distance

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calls from New York and one from Washington, to say nothing of some from town here."

"That tears it," the chief pilot groaned. "The papers will bust the story wide open in the late editions."

"In two hours Jarratt, the president, will be here. If he isn't, and we haven't heard from the *Cruiser* by then, I'm going to bust it open myself, if it costs me my job. We can't just let that ship disappear and not do anything about it!"

"Not do anything about it?" Hewett echoed. "Didn't we pay out two million dollars?"

His fist slammed the desk.

"So what?" Garland groaned. "Where's the *Cruiser?*" He took a long, unhappy breath and then stood up. "Ray," he snapped, a note of determination in his voice. "That new boat we're getting ready for the Trans-Pacific route is in the hangar. Get her ready to take off in five minute's notice. Get a couple of big-ship pilots to stand by all night if necessary. She can make Trinidad in one jump. Assign a steward to her and have him provision her. See there are automatics and ammunition aboard. Borrow a sub-caliber machine gun from the police—just in case. My hunch is we'll take off the minute the president gets here."

Light came into the chief pilot's face at the prospect of doing something more definite than just sitting still.

"Hanging around this way is driving me nuts, Jack," he burst out. "I'll fly the *Pacific Cruiser* myself. I'll take Sam Rogers as co-pilot. He's a friend of Hank MacFarland's, too. If Mr. Jarratt won't let us take her down, I'll deadhead on the morning plane. I want to be there."

AS Hewett went out of the office the telephone buzzed. For an instant there was an open wire and Garland could hear a confused babel of operators' voices. Then a cultured voice, professionally smooth, yet with a wire-thin edge beneath the suavity, broke through.

"This is the State Department, Undersecretary Randolph speaking. To whom am I talking?"

"Garland, Operations Manager, Caribbean Division," the man at the desk said, all his senses snapping to attention.

"Are you the ranking executive in Miami?" the other asked.

"At the moment. The president of the line is now flying down from New York. Be here in a couple of hours. What's on your mind?"

"Perhaps you will tell me then," said the voice from Washington, "where the *European Cruiser* is at this moment? Why hasn't she landed at Trinidad?"

"I wish I—" Garland began, then stopped. "Look, mister, I don't know your voice. You might be the Undersecretary of State, or you might be the Queen of Sheba. Hang up. I'll call you back."

"Promptly, please," said the voice, and the line went dead.

Garland stopped and thought hard for a minute. Then he jiggled the hook. And three minutes later he was again talking to the same voice.

"Sorry, Mr. Randolph, I was afraid you might be a newspaper man. I may lose my job for telling you this, but the *European Cruiser* hasn't reported since 11.30 this morning. We don't know just where she is."

He felt like a fool.

"Are you telling me," the official snapped, "that you think she has crashed?"

"I'm telling you nothing of the sort. We just don't know where she is. We believe she has made a landing somewhere between the mouth of the Orinoco and Trinidad. Any more than that you'll have to learn from the president of the line, Mr. Jarratt."

"Exactly what are you doing to locate her?" the other asked, coldly.

Garland closed his eyes. "You'll have to take my word for it, Mr. Randolph," he said, warily, "that we are doing everything that can be done."

"I doubt it," said Mr. Randolph, severely. "We learn from the Navy and the

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Coast Guard that no appeal for assistance has been made to them."

Garland's hand tightened around the instrument. So now the Navy and the Coast Guard knew about it! After this, the deluge!

"Mr. Garland," the other continued, "we have an agent aboard that plane who is indispensable to us and—"

"And we have a passenger list of forty, and ten men in the crew, who are pretty indispensible to us!" Garland retorted. "We're trying—"

"Just a minute," the other cut in, sharply. "This agent is bringing us certain information which is more important to this government than you can possibly realize. It is entirely possible that this may have a bearing on the disappearance of the plane. Acting upon the belief that it has, we shall immediately ask the Navy and the Coast Guard to coöperate in a search for the ship. I am astonished that you have not asked for assistance before this."

"Listen, mister," Garland begged, a little wildly. "Wait just a couple of hours before you do that, will you? We honestly believe by that time we'll have heard from the *Cruiser* that she's all right and in the air again. If the newspapers break this story it'll raise particular hell and—"

"I think," said the icy smooth voice, "that you are being selfish to the point of criminal negligence. Must I remind you that without the assistance of the State Department you will have difficulty in holding your foreign franchises?"

And then Garland found that he was holding a dead receiver to his ear. He jabbed a button on his desk, spoke into the little box.

"Traffic Manager," he snapped. "Garland speaking. Joe, got the passenger list of the *European Cruiser* there? The State Department says they've got an agent aboard and they are raising a stink. Know who he would be?"

There was a moment's pause. Then, metallically, the box answered.

"Commander Halsey, naval attaché to the embassy at Buenos Aires is aboard. Would he be the one?"

"I guess so," Garland said, tiredly, "and now I know that, what good does it do me?"

"You're asking, Jack," said the traffic manager.

From Hangar One came the deep-voiced bellow of a huge engine. Another burst into life, and another and another until the combined sound shook the very floors of the Air Terminal. Ray Hewett had gone to work. The *Pacific Cruiser* was being warmed up.

* * *

From final edition of the *Miami Evening Independent:*

EUROPEAN CRUISER DOWN AT SEA!
MANY NOTABLES ABOARD DISABLED AIR LINER
OFFICIALS DENY ANXIETY
NO WORD FROM WORLD'S BIGGEST PLANE SINCE NOON

PORT OF SPAIN, TRINIDAD, B.W.I. Nov. 3—(AP) The pride of the Trans-Caribbean fleet, the European Cruiser, with a crew of ten and a passenger list of forty, was still missing at 5. P.M., E.S.T. Due here this afternoon at 2.40, the giant ship was making her first passenger flight northward from Buenos Aires with a passenger list of notables aboard.

According to officials of the line, engine trouble developed about noon and the mammoth flying boat made a landing to effect repairs. T. P. Rogan, local Trans-Caribbean representative, states that no anxiety is felt for the safety of the plane, since she is entirely seaworthy and could float for many days without difficulty. He is of belief that in some way the engine trouble likewise affected the radio, since no word has been received by Trans-Caribbean Wireless since the Cruiser's 11.30 position report. The landing crew here was still standing by at 5 P.M., awaiting the unannounced arrival of the plane.

COAST GUARD CUTTER LEAVES PORTO RICO

SAN JUAN, PORTO RICO, Nov. 3—(AP) Although no appeal for assistance has been received by the Coast Guard, the cutter Cayuga, stationed here, left under forced draught late this afternoon to join in a search for the European Cruiser. She is expected to arrive at Trinidad day after tomorrow and if the plane has not been

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found by that time, will proceed immediately southward to scour the seas.

OFFICIALS HERE UNWORRIED

Officials of the Trans-Caribbean Airways here at Miami expressed themselves this afternoon as unworried over the forced landing of the European Cruiser south of Trinidad.

"A routine matter," said J. F. Curry, public relations representative. "When her engines are repaired, she will take off and resume her flight to Miami, via Trinidad, Porto Rico and Haiti."

It is understood, however, that the Pacific Cruiser, a 32-passenger flying boat, is being made ready at the hangars here, and will take off early this evening on a non-stop flight to Port of Spain, Trinidad. This rumor could not be verified, since the hangars were heavily guarded by police and no newspaper men or visitors were allowed to enter.

Commanded by veteran Captain H. N. MacFarland, the European Cruiser carried a long list of notables on her first round-trip to Buenos Aires. Among them are Miss Ann Hall, daughter of T. G. Hall, prominent sportsman and radio manufacturer; Henry T. Grover, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Intercontinental Bank and Trust Company, New York, J. Hamilton Crouch, President of the World Trading Corporation, New York, Commander Wayne Halsey, U.S.N., Naval Attaché to the United States Embassy, Buenos Aires . . .

CHAPTER XV

DEATH DE LUXE

WHEN TOBY BRONSON opened his eyes and saw the men standing in the compartment, he wasn't sure they were real. His mind was drugged with horrors; nothing could possibly be as terrible, and still be real, as the things that were all tangled up in his memory. Men did not go around killing so casually. They did not put lighted flames against your bare feet. Such things simply did not happen.

He rolled his head slowly.

Dimly he wondered where he was; it was some moments before he recognized the sand-colored walls of smooth mohair and the modernistic chair upholstered in a pastel shade of blue. The de luxe compartment! And the men were real; he could hear the rasp of their voices, the movement of their feet in the deep carpet.

And with returning consciousness, pain came to Toby Bronson. It stabbed into the sole of his right foot, throbbed up through the shocked nerves of his leg. His head felt as if it were bursting wide open. There was an ache in his ribs which jabbed him with each long breath he drew.

He felt sick all over.

And what, he wondered vaguely, was he doing in Ann Hall's compartment? Only a moment ago, it seemed, he had been trussed, hands and feet, in the navigation room, helpless as an animal on the vivisection table, while they did unimaginable things to him. Memory returned fully, and he let his eyes go shut while anger had its vicious way with him. He had been hurt so much this afternoon that his hatred was incandescent, like the flame in an electric crucible. And that inner flame was doing something to him, welding his character together and changing his very nature as it worked. The conventional veneer of his New England upbringing was charred away by the white blaze of that anger, and he was down to his final grim instincts.

Quietly, then, he lay there on his back, waiting for some measure of strength to return to him, listening to the sounds within that compartment and carefully, coldly, wondering how he could contrive to kill these men who had tortured him—kill them in the most painful way, one at a time, so he could laugh at them while they died in agony. That was the extent to which a feeble flame, applied to his bare feet, had changed him.

He heard Voss's voice, and all his nerves tingled with eagerness to stop that voice forever.

"Dessar," Voss was saying calmly, "get into that overnight bag. Her jewel case ought to be in that."

Deliberately he let a faint moan escape his lips. He stirred uncomfortably and shifted his position a bit on the divan. He felt silence flow through the compartment, was sharply aware that the men had turned their heads and were looking at

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him, watching him. A soft sigh ran out of him and he relaxed.

A moment later he heard Dessar's voice, jubilant. "Here it is, boss. Oh, boy!"

Carefully Toby lifted his lids a microscopic fraction of an inch. The way his head was now he could see from beneath his lashes everything that was going on within that compartment.

Dessar was on his knees beside Ann Hall's ravaged luggage. Her intimate things were strewn everywhere in a heap of soft, silken fabrics. And in Dessar's hand was a small leather case filled with jewels which broke the lights into glittering slivers, blue, violet, crimson. Hugo Voss was standing close by. He was staring down at the brilliant display with avid eyes, and cupidity was etched deeply into every line of his face. Beyond Voss's right shoulder was Segurdo, impassive of countenance. The steward was holding a pillow slip like an open-mouthed bag and by the irregular swellings that bulged the lower third of the sack, the haul from stateroom to stateroom had been good. As Toby inspected the tableau he saw Dessar up-end the jewel case into the open mouth of the pillow slip. At the doorway stood the sinister figure of Roope, whose pale eyes shifted uneasily from the loot to Voss's face, and back again to the loot. In his thin, expert hands were two guns, and his forefingers seemed to caress the triggers.

AND beyond the men, standing with her proud, straight back against the starboard wall, stood Ann Hall. All the color had gone from her smooth young face; only the dark line of her brows and the bright curve of her lips lent contrast to the utter whiteness of her skin. Braced there against the rolling of the ship—and now Toby noticed for the first time that the engines were no longer thundering—she looked much younger than he had remembered. Not a day over twenty-two, he thought, regretting the savagery she, at her age, was seeing this day.

"All right," Voss said. "I guess that's all in here." He bestowed a thoughtful glance upon Ann Hall. "You want this purser in here, baby, or should I have him thrown out?"

Instantly Toby dropped his lids and lay there waiting and listening. There was a stretching silence. Then, slowly, she said:

"He—he isn't any trouble. Leave him."

A laugh as brittle as the tearing of old linen came from the thin lips of Roope, at the doorway.

"Boss," he said, "I'll be dropping in from time to time to see he don't start anything."

"Suit yourself," said Voss, carelessly, and Toby, lying there with his eyes closed, could not guess whether he was answering Ann or Roope. "Listen, we ain't going to lock you in any more. From now on you can mill around all you want on this deck. The steward will be serving your dinner pretty soon. Maybe it'll be a little late. If it ain't good, complain to the line."

And Toby, fighting grimly to control his jerking nerves, heard them moving toward the door, heard their feet in the passageway outside, heard the girl close the door with a bang. He pushed himself to a sitting position and looked at her. She was leaning against the panel, her head low, her skin still deathly white. She seemed to be pushing against some force outside, pushing to keep it outside, and not really expecting to succeed.

"They got all your jewels," Toby said.

She started violently and her head came up. She saw him swinging his feet off the divan, and she could hear the rasp of his breath as pain sprang from the burns on his foot.

"Yes," she said, faintly, "and all my money, too. They had a pillow slip half-full of money and watches and rings and things like that."

"Who bandaged my foot?" he wanted to know, pointing downward to where his foot was like a great white cocoon.

"Steward Segurdo and I," she said. "He brought the salve and bandages from the first-aid kit. Is it true they burned you with a cigarette lighter?"

"Yes."

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"That's what the man said who brought you down. He seemed upset."

"Who brought me down? Who seemed upset?"

"One of the hold-up men."

That was hard to believe. "Which one?" Toby demanded.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him before or since."

"Rather tall, with sandy hair and brown eyes?"

"Yes."

Definitely Toby remembered Nitze's reluctance to participate in the torturing. He remembered the horrified tone in Nitze's voice when the man had warned him, just before the fight started up there on the bridge.

"That," he said, slowly, "might be a break for us."

"What might?" the girl said.

"One of those eggs isn't as hard-boiled as the others."

"They're all hard enough," Ann said.

TOBY rolled off the divan. The instant he touched his bandaged foot to the floor it was as if he had dipped it in a bucket of molten lead. He had been prepared for pain—but not this much. He gasped and sat down very suddenly.

"Don't *do* that!" the girl cried. "I can't stand it to see you look like that!"

Toby waited to let the tide of agony roll back down his leg. He would have to get used to the pain sooner or later, he told himself. There were too many things he had to do. They weren't things he could do sitting down. Voss, for instance, would not come to him and say, "Here's my neck. Put your fingers around it and squeeze." No. For that, he'd have to go wherever Voss was.

"I want to tell you something," the girl said, coming over and sitting on the edge of the divan. "I want to tell you about promising to marry Hamilton Crouch."

"That rat!" Toby snarled. "Every time I think about him I want to smash his face flat. I don't want to hear about it."

Her wide violet eyes considered Toby for some instants. Then, slowly she said, "I think I'd like to tell you just the same. I was down in Buenos Aires, visiting my brother—"

"What's your brother's name?" Toby demanded.

"Arthur."

"That's the name you had on the wireless form. The one that said you thought you could go through with something, but couldn't. You—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, his words cut off by the expression on her mobile face. It was not mobile now. It seemed frozen with horror. Toby followed the line of her staring eyes. She was looking at the door.

It was swinging open, stealthily, silently. Toby could see a man's hand on the edge of the door as it pushed it, inch by inch. And then Roope came in. So quietly did he ease himself into that compartment that he seemed to be walking on tiptoes. He sidled across the threshold.

Toby, forgetting the bright agony in his foot, pushed himself off the divan. He put his burned sole to the carpet and almost fell. He had to brace himself against the bulkhead to stand erect. And as he looked at the colorless face of the blond-haired gunman he knew that trouble—much more trouble, had come. Roope's pale eyes were bright and round. He kept licking his thin pink slit of a mouth. And the fingers of his left hand were working convulsively as if he were keyed up to some emotion that had gotten beyond his ability to control. But the fingers of his right hand were not working. They were quiet. Clasped comfortably around the butt of his automatic, they seemed right at home, as if that were the proper place for them, and always had been.

His febrile gaze darted to the girl, then shifted swiftly to Toby. "You, punk," he said in a rasping voice. "Scram."

SLOWLY Toby put his weight on both feet, trying not to wince as white-hot pain ran up his right leg. There would be about six steps to take before he could

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reach the automatic in Roope's hand. He found himself wondering how many bullets would slam into him during those six steps and if he would have any strength left when he got to that man and slid his hands around Roope's thin neck.

Roope's gloating eyes licked toward Ann. "I told you I'd be back, baby," he said in an avid voice. "Tell the boy friend to ease out of here before I give him that thing."

"I'm staying right here," Toby said, his voice low and very hard.

There was no sense in trying to gallop, one-legged, over those five or six steps. Might as well walk, hoping against hope that the man might delay opening fire just long enough for a break. If he could cover three—even two—steps before the first slug smashed into him, he might cover the rest through his own momentum. He took one limping step forward.

"Oh, don't!" cried Ann in a desperate voice. "He'll kill you!"

"And how, toots!" Roope said in a pleased way, not bothering yet to lift his gun.

Roope's colorless eyes were glittering hard and bright. He had a look about him like that of a hungry man in sight of a full meal. Toby realized that the man was actually postponing the pleasurable act of killing him, savoring the anticipation, hating to put an end to it.

At that moment, across Roope's shoulder, a streak of white appeared at the edge of the door. It widened, became a mess-jacket, became Segurdo, side-stepping stealthily into the room. His feet were moving forward, silent as those of a cat. Toby pulled his eyes away from Segurdo's advancing figure lest Roope should see his gaze sharpen and turn to see what he was looking at. But even while Toby was looking at Roope's waiting face, Segurdo was within his range of vision. The steward was directly behind the gunman now. His arms were hanging limp at his sides, but his fingers were curled into hooks.

It was time for Toby to take another step forward. Would that bring the first shot tearing into his flesh and bone? But if he didn't take a step now, Roope would know something was wrong. Very slowly Toby put his weight on his burned foot. His heart was pounding so heavily that it hurt him. He wanted so much to look directly at Segurdo. He must be ready to jump the instant Segurdo got his arms around Roope's neck.

"Come on," Roope purred. "What you waiting for?"

Toby heard Ann Hall moan slightly. Was she going to spoil it? Now he could see Segurdo's dark face distinctly. It was directly behind Roope. The steward's expression was diabolic. His inky eyes were narrowed, his lips skinned back across startlingly white teeth.

Suddenly anxiety came across Roope's face. The gloating look left it. He turned his head slightly in an attitude of strained listening.

Toby got himself set, not caring that all the pain in the world settled in his right foot. Tension piled up in that compartment, became an explosive thing, with the fuse burning closer, closer to the dynamite.

Then Roope understood. His senses reached out and told him an enemy was there behind him. Speed flashed into his muscles as he began to pull his body around.

But he was already too late, by infinitesimal fractions of seconds. And so, as a matter of fact, was Toby Bronson. Segurdo shook his right arm, as if he were shaking water from his cuff. Something bright and shining flowed down his sleeve, slipped easily into his waiting fingers. And the grisly thing that happened next occurred so swiftly that Toby's horrified eyes could scarcely follow. Segurdo's left hand zipped forward, fingers clutching. He grabbed a handful of Roope's pale hair and yanked hard, tipping the gunman's head sidewise and back. The right hand slid up over Roope's shoulder. There was a smooth, sliding motion and that was all. Just one quick dart toward Roope's other shoulder and then back, the gleaming thing

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making a silvery streak against the stretched skin of Roope's throat.

And still, Toby did not know exactly what had happened. He, himself, was already flinging himself forward, arms outstretched, stomach pulled in against the expected slam of a bullet. In full charge he heard Ann's shrill scream, its overtones bouncing back and forth from wall to wall.

As his arms reached for Roope the man had twisted like a snake in Segurdo's grip. His gun flashed around in a blue of light-struck metal. The sound, as he jabbed that gun into Segurdo's stomach and pulled the trigger, was not loud. It was lost in a deeper scream—in Roope's own scream. A hopeless, shocked, incredulous, scream that died away. . . .

Then Toby's encircling arms clamped themselves around a man who was already falling, and blood cascaded over Toby's hands and sleeves. Toby fell on top of Roope, knowing fully that the man was dead, or would be in a moment. Segurdo's darting butcher knife had sliced the man's throat open from ear to ear.

Segurdo was on the floor, too. He was lying on his side, doubled up, his knees almost touching his chin. His white mess-jacket was no longer white. Swiftly it was turning crimson. Convulsively, he rolled over on his face and tried to push himself to his hands and knees, but he could not make it. His wide, dark eyes found Roope, lying almost beside him. Segurdo sucked in his lips and spat full into Roope's face. And then, very quietly, he died.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Printing By Air

IN MINNEAPOLIS and St. Paul fifty forward-looking citizens have installed a new type of radio receiver. This new receiver dispenses with the newsboy—no paper claps against their front door in the dawn. They get their paper by radio, an actual, *written* facsimile.

These new receivers are known as the W. H. G. Fitch Facsimile Receivers. They are contained in a box about a foot square, cost $125, and sit on top of the radio. The box produces printed copy on paper four and one-half inches wide at the rate of five feet per hour.

To bring this strip of printed paper bearing the tidings of the day into your living room, the transmitting station passes the original copy under a beam of light; the white paper reflects the light, the black print does not. A photo-electric cell transmutes the reflection into electrical impulses and these are used to modulate a radio carrier wave. When this reaches the home receiver, it is fed into the facsimile producer instead of through a loud-speaker. The impulses, which in a speaker would produce varying degrees of sound, cause a needle to vibrate upon a sheet of carbon paper, reproducing the original message, as sent from the broadcasting studio.

To a thoughtful student of the times, this utilization of the radio to bear the printed word is a paradox that science can answer only by devising a mechanism that will bring us the dulcet tones of a crooner via the columns of our morning paper.

—*Ralph Mitchell Benton*

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High Bid

By VICTOR KAUFMAN

SOME men lived by selling cattle. Some sold land or food or drink. Some sold the dexterity of their fingers, others the knowledge in their brains. All had something to sell, something to exchange for a living. And so it was with Benjamin Jubal. He lived by his good right arm, by his cool skill, and by the gun held in a holster upon his hip.

He sat on the long hotel porch, quietly smoking, with his chair almost directly beneath a faded sign that said, *Boulder House, 1878.* His coat was wrinkled and worn, his boots dusted by recent riding. The flat brim of his hat dipped low across a thin, unsmiling face, and the narrow string tie at his neck lay sharply black against the dead white of a soft-bosomed shirt. Just another man, he seemed—a small and shrunken man, not worth attention. Yet other men, passing along the rough boardwalks, glanced at him with furtive interest; and the vague evening shadows appeared to clothe him with a hint of their own deep mystery.

Before him, along the wide street, all the strong life of this frontier town paraded. Riders were trotting back and forth, the tread of their horses muffled in the deeply rutted dust. Freight wagons grumbled off into the prairie's wild distance, and down by the livery barn the stage was being made ready for its night run to Boulder Junction where the new railroad scratched a land as yet untamed. Nearby a blacksmith's hammer clanged, each strident echo smothering all other sound at rhythmic intervals. In the two saloons, widely separated, lamp-light began to glow with an increase of evening trade; and the pleasing odor of newly-cooked food came from the hotel kitchen behind.

"Suppose you owned this can of tomatoes," Jubal said. "And it was the only food within a hundred miles . . . . "

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Jubal watched it all, sitting there quietly like a man who might be waiting for someone or some thing. And he did not seem surprised when a hand touched his arm.

"Beg pardon—"

IT WAS a thin voice, a nervous voice; and Jubal glanced up to see a thick-waisted man beside him. A man whose scattered gray hair trembled slightly in the night breeze, whose bronzed oval face held a doubtful expression. He was of about middle-age, dressed as a cattleman might dress, with a woolen shirt under his loose-hanging vest and with the bottom of each trouser leg stuffed into a sturdy high-heeled boot.

"Could you step inside, please?"

Jubal nodded and stood up, scarcely reaching the other's high shoulder. Together they went into the hotel lobby, where smoky, thick-smelling lamps struggled bravely against encroaching gloom. The cattleman selected two chairs in a remote corner, and waited until Benjamin Jubal was seated.

"Your name's Jubal, ain't it?"

Once more Jubal nodded. The uncertain light played over his face to reveal each seam and furrow; it was like a mass of corded leather, that face—like old leather left too long in the sun and the rain. His lips were an inverted crescent and his eyes appeared to remain always in a squint, as if eternally straining along the sights of a gun. They squinted now, mirroring the sharp interest in Jubal's quiet words.

"I reckon you must be Gabe Farnol."

The cattleman put his teeth together and pulled a quick breath between them. "Then Farnol *did* send for you!"

Jubal frowned. "You're not Farnol?"

"No." The answer came in a voice gone quite colorless. "My name's Trask. Ezra Trask. The T-Bar place, ten miles west, belongs to me."

Benjamin Jubal said nothing; he just arched his thin brows. Ezra Trask folded blunt fingers and studied them during a flat silence. Then he looked at Jubal again, uncertainly, weighing each careful word.

"Farnol offered you work?"

Jubal shrugged slightly. "Perhaps."

"But not cattle work."

"I know nothing," Jubal said, "about working cattle."

Trask rubbed a palm across his forehead. He looked at the palm, then resumed the rubbing as if to blot out something within his mind.

"Jubal—" he mused. "Hmmm. Jubal. I've heard of you, all right. You was a marshal or something, in Abilene."

"Ellsworth," Jubal corrected.

"Ellsworth, then. An' you was with the Rangers a while, in Texas. You made quite a reputation there. Seems to me I heard something about a feud down New Mexico way, too. The Lincoln County trouble, wasn't it? You fought there, I understand—but I don't think I ever heard just which side you took."

A hard smile touched Jubal's rigid lips, creating deep canyons upon each weathered cheek.

"Both sides," he said softly.

Trask dropped the hand from his forehead. "Both sides?"

Jubal's tone was that of a man who seeks to make his meaning crystal clear. "Billy Bonney—the kid—was a pretty good friend of mine. I helped him an' his boss for a while. Then"—Jubal shrugged—"well, the other side made me a better offer, that's all."

TIGHTNESS took hold of Trask's expression. He lifted a cigar from the high pocket of his vest and looked at the cigar as if it were an object utterly strange to him.

"So it's the high bid that gets you, eh, Jubal?"

Some men lived by selling cattle. Some sold land or food or drink. Benjamin Jubal happened to be one who sold the gun and the skill to use it—and he had a rigid creed by which all sales were made. A creed that had grown, with all the smoky trouble-years, to be as hard as the life behind it—as unforgiving as the land which had given it birth.

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Jubal put that creed into words now, calmly, just as any man might explain some exact detail of his profession.

"If you had a cow, Trask, an' two men made an offer for it—which one would you take?"

Trask considered, pressure thinning his lips. "That'd all depend—"

"It would depend on who offered the most," Jubal finished. "It would depend on that an' nothing else."

The rancher cleared his throat. "Nine times out of ten I'd likely sell to the highest bidder. But there might be a tenth time—"

"You'd sell to the high man every time," Jubal said, his tone flat. "You'd do it the tenth time, even—unless you happen to be a fool."

"I see," Trask nodded bleakly. "But you're not a fool, are you, Jubal?"

"No," Jubal murmured. "I'm not a fool."

They stared at each other for a moment. Trask drew a deep breath.

"Jubal—ten years back I drove the first herd of Texas beef into this valley. I built a house an' corrals. I fought blizzard an' drought an' I fought the Sioux. I made this land into good cattle range. I saw this town start an' I saw it grow when other herds came in an' the mines to the north opened up." The rancher paused, regarding his fingertips with a glance turned harsh and angry. "The town ain't growing any more, Jubal, because the good range around here is all taken. The drovers who came early got the pick of the grass—an' they made it safe for others to follow. The latecomers, some of them, are a little jealous. Well—next to me is a man who come late. He had to take what was left an' he seems to figure it ain't quite good enough for him . . ."

Trask paused again and looked directly at Benjamin Jubal. "That man would like to take over the range I've been using for these ten years. I reckon, Jubal, that he'd do almost anything to get ahold of my land."

Interest brightened Jubal's eyes, his expression became like that of a doctor who at last finds something he can understand, after many diagnoses which led nowhere. Ezra Trask had really sketched the basic history of this new western county—and Jubal himself was a part of that same history; he understood it as he understood his own mind, in every detail. This was a rough country, a greedy and rugged country, awaiting conquest. A country that often attracted men who merged with the land itself, to learn from that land a lesson of rigid, uncompromising values. Men like Jubal, for instance.

Trask was saying: "Gabe Farnol, the man who sent for you, is the one I mean."

Silence lay between them, after that. Jubal's features became tight and pinched. "I reckon," he observed finally, "that you got some kind of an offer to make me."

"Jubal," Trask muttered, "I'm a peaceful man. I wish no harm to anyone. But sometimes—"

HE broke off, quite suddenly, as a shrill childish yell filled the hotel lobby. There was a quck flurry of small feet across the barren floor. A boy rushed between Jubal and Trask, throwing himself straight into the rancher's big arms.

"Daddy!"

Ezra Trask was, all at once, fully smiling. "Hello, son."

The boy was perhaps six or seven years old, slender and darkly tanned, with unruly hair dangling across eyes that were brightened by a huge excitement. He shoved a hand into the pocket of his washed-out blue overalls and held up something for Trask to see.

"Daddy, look—a knife!"

"Well!" Trask marveled.

Words came from the youngster in a breathless rush. "It—it's just like yours, see? Just exactly like yours. I bet it's bettern'n any knife in the world!"

"I shouldn't wonder," Trask chuckled. He stroked the boy's head. "Where'd you get it, son?"

"Mamma bought it, at Feltman's store. It—"

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Trask stood up, still smiling, his glance turned towards the yonder door. Jubal arose too; he removed his hat, baring thin tangled hair to the faint light. A plump little woman had followed the boy across the lobby, her arms laden with packages. She looked to be younger than Trask, but somewhere in the past there had been hardship and pain; it was a history written deep in the etchings around her eyes. A faded bonnet dangled back from her head, revealing dull hair that was strictly combed to a knot low on her neck. Her dress was of plain homespun, long and flowing.

Ezra Trask murmured: "Back already, Cora?"

"I only bought some goods for a dress," the woman said. "And some new curtains for the parlor, and the knife for Bobby—" She looked down, laughing. "My, that knife! He just wouldn't leave the store without it. You'd think it was worth thousands of dollars."

Jubal's glance went down, automatically. The youngster stood near his father's leg, turning the new knife over and over in his fingers. He opened each blade, then closed each very carefully.

Trask was saying: "Cora, this is Mr. Jubal. My wife, Jubal."

Benjamin Jubal permitted himself a slight bow and a murmured word. The woman said, "I'm pleased to—" and then she paused, staring at Jubal in a way that revealed some quick, chilling thought within her mind.

She turned swiftly towards her husband. "Ezra! What—"

"You go up to the rooms, Cora," Trask interrupted. "I'll be along directly."

The woman hesitated, looking back to Jubal; it was as if she saw him in his own true light. Apprehension deepened the lines around her eyes.

Trask almost begged: "Please, Cora . . ."

She turned, then, groping blindly for the boy's hand. Trask watched them walk across to the hotel stairway, bleakness forming about his lips. He sighed and sank slowly into his chair.

JUBAL stood a moment longer, scowling; it seemed that some strange new thought had occurred to him, throwing all his other thoughts out of line. But the scowl passed quickly away, and the hard sharpness returned. Jubal sat down.

He brought the conversation abruptly back to life. "You got an offer to make me?"

"Jubal—" Trask spoke in a voice that shook. "Was I younger I'd not ask for help. I'd face Farnol or any man he might send against me. But—I've got *them* to think of now."

The pressure increased upon Jubal's lips. Ezra Trask stared for a hopeful moment, then laughed shortly.

"I'm not a rich man, Jubal. Certain parties around here have taken to stealing beef. What with that an' the low price I got last year—" He paused, considering his fingers. "Well, I could maybe offer you a thousand dollars."

"Cash?"

Trask looked up, frowning. "When my cattle are shipped next month—"

"Cash," Jubal said. And it was not a question this time.

"You're a hard man, Jubal."

Benjamin Jubal shrugged. "I hold no illusions, that's all. Nature give me a certain skill an' I use it. Things being as they are in this country, I have to be careful. I take risks other men are unwilling to take —an' I expect to be paid."

Defeat dulled Trask's words. "Five hundred, then. I reckon that's about all I could scrape up just now."

"Five hundred?" Jubal glanced down at his long, tapered hands. "Let's talk out plain, Trask. You're offering me five hundred dollars to—to remove Gabe Farnol."

The rancher's reply was quick, breathless. "No! I'm offering you the five hundred if you'll ride out of Boulder without meeting Farnol. I'm offering it for you not to kill *me*."

Jubal asked softly: "So that's what Gabe Farnol wants of me?"

"Farnol would like to see me dead," Trask muttered. "He's tried to break me by

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stealing my beef an' running his cattle on some of my grass. But that ain't enough, not for Gabe Farnol. He—" The rancher shrugged. "I've expected for some time that Farnol would bring in some man like you, Jubal. So when the clerk told me, tonight, about you coming, I—well, what else can a man think?"

"But why me?" Jubal queried. "Why not Farnol himself, or one of his men?"

Trask smiled ironically. "Gabe Farnol's a careful man, an' not one to take many risks. Maybe that's why he ain't fought me before this, out in the open. I don't know. But I thank God for his caution, Jubal. I ain't a gunman. You can see that—I'm not even wearing a gun right now. An' my riders, they're just cowhands. The same, I reckon, could be said of Farnol an' his men. We ain't fighters, Jubal. None of us."

"An' so," Jubal murmured, "you figured to buy me off. You want me to leave without even seeing Gabe Farnol."

Ezra Trask nodded, lips compressed.

"Why?" Jubal asked the question sharply. "Why, Trask? Are you afraid Farnol will offer me more to—"

The color left Trask's face. "I don't know," he said, "how much Farnol will offer."

Benjamin Jubal smiled his hard smile; he watched Trask very closely. "Suppose I do go? What good will that do you? Farnol will only find another way. He'll just hire someone else to do the job he wants done."

EZRA TRASK lifted both palms in a weary gesture. "Yes, I suppose he will. It's a chance I always take, an' something I can't worry about. Looking ahead only brings grief. A man can expect just so much luck, Jubal. Right now I'm thinking about you, not about the others."

"Still," Jubal mused, "as long as Farnol lives, there'll be danger for you. You know this country as well as I do, Trask. It's dog eat dog, with the strongest dog the one who sleeps on a full stomach." Jubal moved his hands in a level sweep, as if smoothing the air before him. "Now if you could just raise a little more money I'd arrange to—"

The rancher stiffened in his chair. "I don't buy murder," he said flatly. "I've made the only offer I'll make—five hundred for you to leave."

Jubal did not answer, and at last Ezra Trask allowed his probing gaze to slide away from Jubal's face. Trask seemed to speak to his own folded hands.

"My offer ain't enough?"

There was doubt on Benjamin Jubal's countenance, doubt that rode his cheeks like a man in a strange saddle.

"I don't know," he murmured. "I don't know."

Trask jerked to his feet, with sudden violent color staining his features.

"Go see Farnol, then! See him an' drive your bargain! I—" The rancher paused. He stood there stiffly, staring down at Jubal with a queer mixture of pity and scorn.

"Jubal," he said softly, "I'd hate to be doomed to the hell you'll face someday."

And then Trask walked away, swiftly, as if he wished to retreat from something unclean.

Benjamin Jubal didn't move for a long while. He sat there like a wizened dummy, regarding his two hands as if he'd never seen them before. Then, at last, he laughed without any particular tone to his laugh. He shoved out of the chair and walked onto the hotel porch.

Darkness was a complete thing now; the faint stars winked overhead. The blacksmith's hammer no longer clanged, but a stronger light gleamed in the two saloons and the yonder dance-hall was alive with music and laughter. Just up the street a storekeeper swept the walk before his place, preparing to close up for the night.

Jubal remained on the porch, building a cigarette in those skilled fingers of his. With the smoke finally complete and drawing well, he turned up the walk. The scowl—the puzzled, doubtful scowl—came back to crease his brow; his hands were clasped behind his back and his eyes were

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intent upon the boards that squealed beneath his tread.

Coming opposite the store, Jubal stopped. The words, *Saul Feltman, General Merchandise,* were painted upon a smudgy front window, and a shaft of pale light streamed through the open door to pattern the dusty street beyond. A bearded, fat-faced man—Feltman himself—was just hanging up his apron on a nail in the back wall.

For a moment, Jubal frowned at the store and at the fussing merchant. Then he entered, walking straight to a counter that was cluttered with cans and boxes and white sacks of flour. Feltman bustled over to Jubal's elbow, smiling, rubbing his palms together.

"Somethings I could done for you, sir?"

Jubal picked up a brightly-labeled tomato can. He held it for Feltman to see.

The merchant beamed. "I could sold you a half-dozen at a real savings. A half-dozen for only—"

"No," Jubal said. "I want to know something. Suppose you owned this can of tomatoes. Supose it was the only food within a hundred miles. Two men want it, see? One of the men don't deserve the food; he's already robbed from others. But that man is willing to pay a hundred dollars for this can. The other man is close to starving, we'll say. He needs the food—but he's only got a single dollar." Jubal looked steadily at Saul Feltman. "Which man," he asked, "would get the can from you?"

Feltman stared. "What is that?"

"Which man," Jubal repeated, "would get the can?"

The storekeeper made a noise in his throat. "What a crazy questions! If the man was starving I would *gave* him the can!"

Jubal replaced the can to the counter. "Is that so?" he asked. "Is that so?"

"Now listens!" Feltman used an injured tone. "I got to close for the nights. If you have only to ask foolish—"

But Jubal wasn't listening. He turned out the door, shaking his head, and continued along the walk at a slow, thoughtful pace. He passed the far saloon, reached the very end of Boulder's darkened street. The stars appeared brighter from here, and Jubal looked up at them for some time. Smoke from his cigarette curled through the shadows.

AT LAST he tossed away the cigarette and started to retrace his steps. But he stopped almost instantly, for three uncertain figures advanced upon him from the saloon's light-streaked porch. A voice called: "Jubal?"

It was a tall man speaking, a thin man who made a lean shadow in the darkness. His two companions paused while he stepped closer to Benjamin Jubal.

"I reckon," Jubal said, "that you must be Gabe Farnol."

The tall man halted; his big sombrero waggled assent. "I looked for you at the hotel, Jubal, but the clerk said you'd gone out." Farnol hesitated, seeming to watch Jubal carefully. "The clerk also said that you'd been talkin' with Ezra Trask."

"Why yes," Jubal murmured. "We talked a little."

Farnol's voice dropped in temperature. "What did you talk about, Jubal?"

The two men behind—young cowhands, they were—seemed to settle in their tracks and become stiff, rigid shapes; their breathing made a harsh sound in the silence. Farnol stood very still.

"What did you talk about?"

Benjamin Jubal laughed softly. "Why, quite a few things. But we didn't agree, somehow. Trask seemed to have the idea I wanted to leave town. Fact is, he offered me five hundred dollars if I'd leave without seeing you."

"He did, eh?" Farnol chuckled deep in his throat. His head tipped back so that the vague saloon lights could touch his face—and something about that face seemed to bring an expression of satisfaction into Jubal's eyes. It was a lean sunken face, marked by a heavy mustache; the face of a man who would be able to meet Benjamin Jubal upon common ground.

"So he offered you money to leave?"

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Farnol's deep-set eyes appeared to brighten in the light. It was his turn to laugh. "Then I reckon, Jubal, that you know the story."

"I think I do."

Gabe Farnol nodded. "Yes, you know. Well, it saves us that much time. I hadn't planned to use a man like you, Jubal. But one of my riders was in Cheyenne last week. He heard you was stayin' there an' he made mention of it when he come back. So I decided to send for you."

"An' I'm here."

"I see you are," Farnol murmured. "Five hundred wasn't enough, eh?"

Jubal said quietly: "I haven't decided."

"I'll make it six!"

The next question from Jubal seemed irrevelant. "Who runs the law in this town?"

Farnol waved his hand impatiently. "You needn't worry about the law. We have a marshal, of course—but he's a cautious man an' I doubt if he'll give you trouble. Our county government ain't so strong either. The sheriff's a long way off. He don't often worry about things that happen in Boulder."

"Still," Jubal objected, "there might be trouble."

The rancher shook his head. "No. All you'd have to do is meet Trask again. He'd know why you was there an' he'd try for his gun. A man like you could give him the draw—an' with him drawin' first it'd be a clear case of self-defense."

"Six hundred," Jubal said softly, "is not quite enough."

Gabe Farnol studied Jubal in the silence. "I've always heard you drove a hard bargain."

Benjamin Jubal shrugged. "Someday, Farnol, I'll meet a man who'll take my number. It's a chance I run every time a thing like this comes up."

"There's no risk this time," Farnol muttered. "Trask ain't a gunman. I could do the job myself, or let one of my boys do it—only we got to stay in this country. You don't. You can ride out an' it don't make no difference whether you come back again or not."

ALL DOUBT was gone from Jubal's face; the old hard sharpness returned. He said: "I might consider a thousand."

"Eight hundred."

Jubal said nothing. He just stood there, smiling his flat smile. The rancher swore softly.

"All right, a thousand."

"Cash?"

Farnol nodded. "Cash."

"You have the money?"

"I'll have it when the job's done," Farnol said. "You come back an' see me."

"I might be in a hurry to leave," Jubal said.

"Not that much of a hurry."

Benjamin Jubal hesitated, then spoke quite clearly. "I'll tell you something else about me, Farnol. I always collect my pay. Always."

"Don't worry," Farnol grumbled. "I won't try any tricks, not on you. You'll collect, all right."

A cowhand walked swiftly down the street. He sidled up to Farnol and said: "Just saw Trask come out of the hotel. He's over at the Palace, drinking, an' he's wearing a gun."

Farnol nodded, looking back to Jubal. "There's your man. I reckon he'll be expectin' you."

Jubal asked: "The Palace is that other saloon up there?"

"The one across from the hotel," Farnol agreed. "Go on, Jubal. I'll be waitin' here."

Benjamin Jubal inclined his head. "I'll be back," he murmured—and he turned up the street, walking slowly, like a man who knows he has plenty of time.

A cloud had come out of the west to veil the stars and the sky above grew murky. Down along Boulder's wide street the shadows were dark and still. Jubal himself was a shadow, advancing with head held high and with both arms hanging easily beside him. He might have been just a lawyer on his way to court, or a doctor ready to face some particularly routine operation. His boots drew hollow sounds from the walk.

Then, suddenly, he stopped. His eyes

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began to search the shadows and there was a quick stiffness about his right arm.

He challenged sharply: "Who's that?"

But almost at once the stiffness went away and Jubal muttered a soft exclamation. It was the boy standing there—young Bobby Trask. He seemed incredibly small, crouched back in an alley's narrow mouth; a long white nightgown was his only covering, and his bare feet stirred nervously in the dust. He held one arm towards Jubal, palm up. The dull glow from some distant street-lamp glittered against something metallic in his hand.

"It's worth a lot of money, I bet," the boy said, his voice almost lost in the immensity of the night. "It's worth an awful' lot, Mr. Jubal. I wouldn't take a million dollars for it. I wouldn't even take a hundred million . . ."

Jubal stood very still, a man faced by a thing he could not immediately comprehend. The boy looked up.

"My daddy told mamma," he said. "They sent me to bed in the next room, but I heard him say it. He told mamma you was the only man who c'ld help him. That's just what he said. Then he said he didn't have enough money to pay you, an' he went out an' mamma began to cry."

A QUICK gasp escaped Benjamin Jubal. He kneeled, and his fingers reached out to fasten upon the boy's arm.

"I wonder if you really know—?" But Jubal paused, shaking his head. "No. You wouldn't know."

"I—I don't like to hear mamma cry," Bobby Trask whimpered. He flinched a little because Jubal's fingers were biting his arm. "I snuck out an' I thought . . ."

Jubal was staring at the boy's tight hand. "Your knife," Jubal muttered. "You thought if you gave me your knife—"

"It's a swell knife," Bobby Trask said.

Something suddenly seemed very funny to Benjamin Jubal, for he threw back his head and laughed. The boy drew away from him, uncertain and alarmed and a little embarrassed. Then, abruptly, Jubal stopped laughing. His face chilled.

"Listen!" Jubal shook the boy, almost savagely. "Listen to me!"

"Y—yes, sir . . ."

"Stay right here!" Jubal snapped. Understand me? You stay right here. Don't go into the street. No matter what you hear, don't go into the street. This's a thing a kid like you shouldn't see."

Bobby Trask stared dumbly, nodding. Jubal stood up. He repeated: "Stay here!" And the deep shadows engulfed him as he moved off.

Sudden stillness hovered over the town; the merry sounds from the dance-hall were muffled, and the clatter of pans in the nearby hotel kitchen seemed to be distant, unreal things. Upon some far-off butte a coyote howled . . .

The boy shrank back in the alley shadows; the knife created deep ridges on his palm, where he gripped it so hard. The silence settled; the silence grew. And then it was savagely torn apart by the quick lash of gunfire. Someone yelled off yonder and someone else was cursing. More shots piled up their echoes. Down by the hotel a woman screamed.

One sharp startled cry came from the boy; after that all breath seemed to fail him and he scarcely breathed. He couldn't move. He could only stand there, wide-eyed, afraid without knowing exactly what he feared.

The moments scurried by, quick little flashes of time following the gun-echoes into eternity. And there was suddenly a shadow looming beside the boy. A hand reached down; it grabbed the boy's hand, wrenched open the boy's stiff fingers and tore the knife away. The boy cried out. But the shadow was already gone.

Some men lived by selling cattle. Some sold land or food or drink. Jubal lived by his good right arm, by his cool skill and by the gun held in a holster upon his hip. These things Jubal sold.

These things he sold by a rigid creed: he always honored the high bid—and he always collected.

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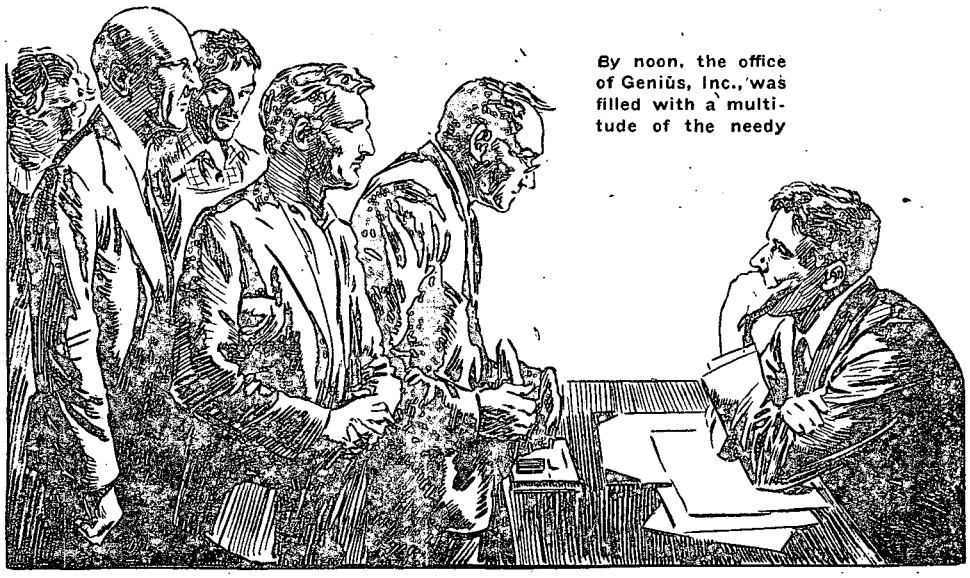

By noon, the office of Genius, Inc., was filled with a multitude of the needy

Genius Jones

By LESTER DENT

MAYBE the man Jones should have stayed on his iceberg. Raised in the Arctic, the sole survivor of an ill-fated polar expedition, tutored by the textbooks from the expedition library, Jones found himself singularly ill-equipped to cope with modern civilization.

Thumbing, so to speak, a ride on billionaire Polyphemus Ward's yacht, he is soon the center of a vortex of conflicting ambitions—the target of a thousand plots. For, with a characteristic gesture, Ward has given Jones one hundred thousand dollars to distribute to the needy. If he succeeds in doing so to Ward's satisfaction, Ward will give him a million dollars and appoint him administrator of his vast estate. One of the conditions is that Jones keep the arrangement a secret.

But Glacia de Grandrieu finds out about it. And gets herself engaged to Jones. Ward's envious private secretary, Lyman Lee, finds out about it, and immediately begins contriving Jones' downfall.

FIRST he arranges a murder frame-up and puts the police on Jones' track. Then he engages a confidence man who, in one fell swoop, takes Jones for exactly half of the hundred thousand. Finally he makes a deal with the lovely, icy-hearted Glacia—if she can get the other fifty thousand from Jones, she may have it for herself. Glacia, convinced that Jones is stymied, consoles herself with the thought that fifty thousand is a great deal better than nothing at all, and proceeds in full cry.

Meanwhile Jones has annexed a pair of baffled but honest guardian angels—Funny Pegger, a lackwitted, kindhearted publicity man, and a red-headed girl known only as Vix, in whose apartment Pegger and Jones are temporarily camping out. Knowing only that Jones has fifty thousand dollars which he is determined to double and then to give away, they entertain grave doubts as to his sanity.

JONES eludes their guardianship on his fourth day in New York. He calls on Lyman Lee and tells him that he, Jones, is convinced of Lee's duplicity.

"I shall not," he says, "be taken in by you again, Mr. Lee."

On the street he bumps into Glacia and arranges to see her that night.

Because Glacia was the first non-Esquimau female he ever laid eyes on and the only woman of any description he has ever kissed, he is certain that he is in love with her. However as he wanders about the street after their meeting, the thought occurs to him that possibly it would be just

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as exciting—maybe more so—to kiss other girls. Another girl, at least. Vix, for instance.

He rushes home to put this new theory to the test of practice. Brushing Pegger aside, he strides purposefully toward the kitchen where Vix is getting supper.

Pegger looks after him in awe. "Criminy," he exclaims. "Something is gonna happen! . . ."

CHAPTER XX

THE PHILISTINE

ON the Arctic island which had been Jones's home for practically all of his life, there had been leisure to burn. In the course of twenty years, almost nothing had happened except blizzards, snowstorms, eighty-below-zero cold snaps, scarcities of seals for food and occasionally an iceberg which broke off the island glacier while one was hunting on it, but these things could be expected, being more or less orderly processes in such an existence. Furthermore, they happened at wide intervals, so there was plenty of time in between to accustom oneself. But lately, event after event had occurred to Jones in slap-bang haste; there was nothing like the leisure he would have liked to let facts sink into his mind and ripen. There was too much that was new, and no time to assimilate, to enjoy the taste of the unique. Above all, Jones would have liked to go on to each new thing slowly, taking his own time, but that was just what he hadn't been able to do. It was impossible. The lightning had struck so fast that he had nearly lost count—everything was kaleidoscopic, and it didn't seem possible at times that it could be real.

Jones was well acquainted with his own mind; the solitude of his previous life had equipped him with that asset. So he knew the danger of being swept up in the speed of new things, of becoming confused, of letting amazement knock him in the head. He had to prevent that, and the best antitoxin seemed to be to make his mind take hold of only the important things, the fundamentals.

And one of the fundamentals was the effect Glacia had on him. Effect wasn't a suitably inclusive term, the upclap being decidedly conglomerate. But it narrowed down to the fact that whenever Glacia had kissed him there had been an explosion. . . .

He ignored Funny Pegger, and stalked into the apartment's toy-size kitchenette.

Vix was trim and pert in a brown street frock and a saucy little hat that tried vainly to confine her red hair. She still had that quality that made Jones go bump-bump inside.

He didn't stop to analyze—he took an astonished auburn-headed young woman in both arms and kissed her, very well, considering that it was semi-amateur effort.

Jones released Vix and stepped back.

"Hmmm," he said thoughtfully.

"I—uh—what—" Vix said, and looked as if she had a great deal more to say, once she got the breath.

"I am," Jones announced, "disappointed."

Vix stared at Jones as though she hadn't heard right.

"Disappointed?" she said. "Did you say—"

"The explosion," said Jones gravely, "didn't happen."

Vix shook her head sharply, as if she had just taken a dive and wanted to get the water out of her ears. "Explosion?"

Jones nodded. "Yes," he said. "I—er—rather hoped there would be one."

Vix took a step backward, and her angry blue eyes flicked around the kitchenette, and selected a sack of groceries.

"I wouldn't," she snapped, "see you disappointed for the world."

SHE drew a tomato out of the grocery sack and hit Jones in the right eye; and it was a juicy tomato.

Then Jones felt himself seized, realizing he was being propelled out of the kitchenette, heard the door slam, and the key turn in the lock. He had been rescued, he perceived, by Funny Pegger. He folded down in a living-room chair to which the gag man towed him.

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"Er—is she still after me?" he asked anxiously.

"I locked the door," Funny Pegger said.

Jones groped in his hip pocket for his handkerchief. He swabbed tomato seeds and pulp out of his eyes. The situation seemed to call for a statement.

"Er—fiasco," he remarked, defining aloud, "is a bottle or flask, usually having a long neck and covered with plaited straw. The word also implies a complete and ridiculous failure, usually of dramatic nature."

"Either one," said Funny Pegger, "covers you."

"Eh?"

"Skip it. What were you doing?"

"I—conducting an experiment."

"Experiment?"

Jones nodded. "I imagined," he explained, "that I could prove a point."

"So," Funny Pegger snorted, "you have an imagination!"

"I—almost everybody has one, I presume."

"Disregard yours," the gag man ordered. "It plays dirty tricks on you."

Jones blinked at Funny Pegger with watery-eyed earnestness.

"I wished," he said feelingly, "to ascertain whether the result of the kiss was a stable quantity, and more specifically, I desired to know whether the same thing would happen when I kissed Vix as when I kissed Glacia."

"It sounds involved," Funny Pegger said.

Jones missed the sarcasm. "Oh, yes, it was important."

"Did you find out?"

"Oh, yes."

"Which girl won?"

"Er—it was not exactly a contest, but when I kiss Glacia, there is a dependable explosive effect."

"And Vix?"

"A sort of sinking sensation."

"You tell Vix that?"

"I—yes."

"It's a wonder," said Funny Pegger, "that you're still as nature made you."

Jones blinked moistly at the gag man and perceived that the latter thought what had just happened was anything but serious. Jones wondered if possibly it was so important. A moment ago, it had seemed vital, needing immediate attention. Perhaps he was wrong. He felt suspended.

FUNNY PEGGER frowned at Jones. "I presume," he said caustically, "that you've given up the idea of making fifty thousand dollars to replace what you lost."

"Why, no! What gave you that idea?"

"Well, you were going around kissing girls to see what would happen."

"I—"

"Or maybe you've already made fifty grand?"

"I have not," Jones reminded him uncomfortably, "been away from her more than two hours. That interval is hardly sufficient to acquire such a sum."

"I know. But queer things happen when you're around." Funny Pegger screwed up his round, homely face. "Just what did you do that brought you back here with kissing ideas?"

"I visited Lyman Lee," Jones said, anxious to change the subject.

Funny Pegger jumped. "You—what?"

Jones nodded. "I told Lyman Lee to refrain from molesting me. The alternative, I explained, was to—er—get his block knocked off."

"His block—" Funny Pegger swallowed. "Did it take?"

"I—take?"

"Never mind. It didn't, regardless of what you think. You can't bluff that monocle-wearing fashion-plate." The gag man sighed. "But at that, trying to throw the fear of God into him was a more sensible idea than some you've had."

"Thank you," Jones said.

"But," continued Funny Pegger, "you left here looking for the stock market, a pony, or a crap game. You wanted to make fifty grand in a hurry. Remember?"

"The stock market," Jones explained, "was closed."

"Providence is kind!"

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Jones watched Funny Pegger topple into a chair. "I met Glacia."

Funny Pegger sailed out of the chair. "Light!" he yelled. "I see a light!"

"You—do?"

"Glacia."

"Oh, yes. Glacia."

"The sure bet for a guy to raise himself with a queen is to show a little jack."

"Er—"

"Money doesn't grow on trees, but some girls will reach to pick it.

"Why—"

"The point," Funny Pegger said, "is that Glacia threw the hooks into you. She—"

"I do not," Jones interrupted, "care to hear any more in that vein!"

"Now look here—"

"*You* look here!" Jones said grimly. "I do not wish to hear reflections on the character of my—of Glacia."

Jones realized there was a vehemence in his voice which he had never heard there before.

Pegger frowned, spread his hands on his knees and contemplated them. The clock made tiny sound in the apartment, while outdoors automobiles hooted and an elevated train went volleying along. Jones shifted in the chair to get his hip off the hump the roll of fifty one-thousand dollar bills made in his pocket. Then he sat stiffly, as if thinking.

In the kitchen, Vix struck or kicked the locked door.

Funny Pegger, looking defeated, went to the kitchen door and opened it, and Vix said: "Both you clowns can take your hyena manners and get out—"

"Shush!" Funny Pegger said pleadingly. "The headless horseman rides the countryside."

He stepped into the kitchen and closed the door. Vix stared at him.

"Since when did he ever have a head?" she demanded.

"The citizens of the United States are getting a bad habit," Funny Pegger said. "They're underestimating this Jones."

"You must be the man who still thinks the Democrats will lower taxes," Vix suggested.

Funny Pegger ambled around the kitchen, nosing into sacks, and found an orange, which he began to peel, licking his fingers frequently, dropping the orange skins in the sink.

"You gotta remember," he pointed out, "that he really saw the world for the first time only day before yesterday, when the yacht got to New York. Before that, he was on an island—"

"Wouldn't it have been divine," Vix mused, "if he had stayed there?"

"My point," persisted Funny Pegger, "is that he ain't doing so bad."

Vix sniffed. "He's not?"

"Considering everything, no."

"You saw," Vix inquired, "what happened to me a minute ago?"

"So what? You've been kissed before."

"Not," Vix retorted, "as often as you might expect. Which is beside the question. My argument is that you can never tell what that iceberg hermit is going to do next."

"Only makes him interesting."

"To me," Vix said, "it doesn't! To borrow one of those mummies you call jokes—this is the fishhook."

"The what?"

"The end of the line. I get off here."

VIX walked briskly to the bedroom, ignoring Jones, and began to tinker with her hat.

Funny Pegger came into the living room, hissed at Jones, "You've just about done us out of our boarding-place!" and followed Vix into the bedroom. He closed the door so Jones could not hear them. "Look," he said uneasily. "You're gonna let us go on using your apartment, ain't you?"

"Yes," Vix said.

"Gosh, that's swell!"

"Providing," Vix added, "that it is agreeable with the nice big policeman I'm going to send over to look for rodents."

Funny Pegger strangled on the last slice of the orange.

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"Vix! You can't send the cops!"

Vix shrugged. "As a taxpayer, I understand I'm entitled to such service."

"But they'll arrest Jones!" the gag man said wildly.

"You, too," Vix reminded.

"They'll arrest Jones," Funny Pegger groaned. "They'll arrest him for shooting that German liner captain in the leg. Later, the German died unexpectedly. Don't you remember?"

"My memory is good enough. I seem to recollect that the police would also like to arrest *you* for consorting with and aiding this Jones."

"Great grief!"

"Jones," said Vix, "should be in jail for his own good."

"Oh, Lord!"

"And probably jail will make an improvement in *you*, too."

Funny Pegger slumped on the edge of the bed, arms hanging limply, and when he caught Vix's eye, he turned his palms up and looked disconsolate. Vix sniffed. She dragged a trim brown leather weekend case out of a closet and began stuffing it with feminine apparel.

"Poor Jones," repeated Funny Pegger. "He's a swell guy, and he'd have made it all right if he hadn't happened to meet a lot of zany people."

Vix struck an attitude of thought. "I believe," she remarked, "that I shall wear the rust dress instead of this one."

The gag man shook his head solemnly. "Of course," he said, "it might not have been so bad if Jones hadn't got the idea that the stock market, the horses or a crap game was the best way to make fifty thousand dollars in a hurry."

"Will you shut up?" Vix requested.

"Jones," said Funny Pegger, "is bound and determined to try one of those three ways of making money. He'll doubtless lose the fifty thousand he already has."

Vix stamped a foot hotly. "I don't care!"

"It's too bad."

"Jones," Vix snapped, "is a—a Philistine!"

"I—"

"I can't remember when I've hated anybody so much!"

"But—"

"Jones," Vix gritted, "insulted me like no girl was ever insulted before."

"He only said he didn't explode—"

"I could take an ax to him!"

"Well—"

"But," Vix said, "I'm not going to leave here and have him lose that money on stocks, horses or an African golf game."

Funny Pegger grinned. "You're not?"

"No, I'm not. Because it was me who gave him the crazy idea."

"*You?*"

Vix nodded grimly. "Yes," she said.

"What did you do that for?" yelled the gag man.

"I was kidding him." Vix looked disgusted. "How was I to know he would take it seriously?"

Funny Pegger glanced at Vix's trim shape, colorful hair and her pert and rather delectable features.

"You're an item," he said, "that any man is liable to take seriously."

"I don't make them explode, though!" Vix nipped her lower lip angrily. "The big—seal!"

"Sure." Funny Pegger grinned. "I understand. Clearly."

Vix narrowed her left eye at Funny Pegger, apparently unfavorably impressed by an it's-all-right-if-you-want-to-say-it's-that-way quality in the gag man's voice.

Funny Pegger looked uncomfortable. "Let's go chain the Philistine," he suggested.

Vix nodded. They opened the bedroom door, went into the living room, and looked around, casually at first, then with quick anxiety.

Funny Pegger blurted, "He's gone!"

CHAPTER XXI

CLOTHES FOR GIRLS

JONES had a date with Glacia for eight o'clock. Now it was five minutes past, and Jones was disturbed, because Glacia had not appeared. He stood in front of

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the apartment house, looked around in vain for his lady and worried. He lacked experience with the feminine habit of being late. He began to pace back and forth under the sidewalk awning and ponder. Funny Pegger and Vix, it seemed to him, opposed almost everything he wanted to do, so he had eased out of the apartment without notifying them. Their attitude troubled him; they were the two people whom he really counted as friends, since they had given him assistance. Jones frowned. Every time he opened a door in his mind, there was a fresh difficulty. Whenever he tried to solve a problem, he unchained a new trouble, so that his progress so far, he reflected glumly, could be put in the eye of a rather small Arctic gnat. There must be needy persons in New York. He had noticed, in glancing at the newspaper which carried the story about the police looking for him, that Congress was considering appropriating another four billion dollars or some such astronomical sum to relieve needy people. He wished he had read the item more closely.

In trying to give away his paltry hundred thousand, he was apparently going into competition with the government.

The idea of a government giving away such a sum made him feel rather incompetent by comparison. He only had a hundred thousand. That a government, any government, could find needy persons for billions, whereas he had not been able to find a single genuinely needy person, was discouraging.

Then a musical voice was sounding at his elbow.

"Why, darling," it said. "I do hope I'm not late."

It was Glacia. Glacia, attired in—Jones thought with a gulp—disturbingly little. Whoever had constructed the scintillating thing she wore had skimped scandalously on the upper area. Still, Glacia created an effect. She hit Jones about the way she hit the average observer—the same as a hatful of diamonds.

"I do hope," Glacia repeated, "that I'm not late."

"I—not at all," gasped Jones. "Not at all. You are ahead of time—er—that is, I wouldn't have minded waiting for you. Not a bit."

The motor car into which Jones found himself helping Glacia was impressive. It was Arctic sky blue. Half the machine was hood, but there was enough left over for an outdoor driver's seat where a small, uniformed brown chauffeur sat, and a closed tonneau of plush, subdued lighting, and delicate perfume.

Before he got in, Jones inspected the small brown man behind the wheel. The flamboyance of the latter's uniform urged forth a quotation.

"Regalia," Jones remarked, "is a kind of cigar of large size. Also the emblems, symbols and paraphernalia of persons of royal rank, or the decorations or insignia of an office or order."

The city at night, particularly the number and variety of the electric signs, still intrigued Jones. He resolved not to let them fascinate him, and looked at Glacia instead, which was almost as distracting.

"I wish," he said bluntly, "to engage in a serious discussion."

"You dear boy," Glacia murmured. "You're always so serious, aren't you?" She gave his arm a squeeze. "Frivolous people bore me to distraction. And it's *so* seldom that I find a man with a mature mind."

"Er—you think I possess a mature mind?" Jones inquired.

"Oh, very mature." Glacia looked up into his face. "You're not too mature, though. You have the delightful enthusiasm of youth, tempered by a soberly balanced intelligence."

"Indeed?"

"You have," said Glacia, "a comprehensively rounded personality with an objective essence."

"Objective essence?"

"Tempered," Glacia murmured, "by an affinity for intellectual self-communion."

Jones glowed.

"Thank you!" he said feelingly.

It was mighty good to hear someone

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say that they thought he might have some brains, and use five-dollar words to do so. Vix had insinuated that he did not have enough gray matter to be running around loose. He found himself mentally contrasting the two women. Glacia was ravishing and owned a flattering opinion of Jones. Vix was a saucy redhead with a nice figure, a caustic wit, and more temper than Jones had imagined could be contained in one individual. The comparison absorbed him. He forgot to go ahead with what he had started to discuss.

ALL afternoon it had looked like rain, but the sky had cleared, and the night was cooled by a breeze from the Atlantic. The blue town-car rolled without noise, hardly swayed, and the invigorating air poured in through the open window and seemed to lend a zest to the delicate perfume present inside. It took a turn to the right, fording a dense stream of pedestrians, and entered an electric blaze that rivaled the sun.

Jones stuck his head out of the window. He was stunned. He'd thought he had been seeing some bright lights, but they were candles. The Aurora Borealis had never been like this.

"Gracious!" Jones remarked.

"This is Broadway," said Glacia. "Sometimes called the Great White Way."

A few moments later, their driver was holding open the limousine door, then Jones found himself guided across a crowded lobby, into an elevator which arose many floors, then through a throng of women dressed in the same kind of thing Glacia was wearing, and men attired in dress suits or street clothes such as Jones wore. A large oily gentleman who could bow with amazing speed, called *"Garçon"* by Glacia, escorted them to a table.

"You wait here, darling," Glacia directed. "I'm going to the dressing room and pretty up."

Her tone implied she was going to pretty up for Jones. . . .

At a discreet table behind some palms, Glacia dropped into a chair beside a man who had a long face, sleepy lids, a drowsy expression, and who held a lighted cigarette between the two forefingers of his left hand.

"Hello, Tray," Glacia said.

Tray Marco pulled smoke out of his cigarette, held it a while in his lungs, then let it out, and mixed words with the escaping smoke. "How's it go?"

Glacia said to the other two men at the table, "Hello, Forgetful. Hello, Hover," and Forgetful Osborn looked at her blankly as though trying to recall who she might be, then grinned widely. Harold Hover nodded, moistening his lips with a pale tongue. Paul Shevinsky, the fourth man at the table, said, "Don't I rate a nod, darling?"

Glacia looked at him. Paul Shevinsky was examining her, bending forward a little, his thick lips parted.

"Hello, Paul," Glacia said. "Where is Lyman?"

Tray Marco moved his cigarette slightly. He said, "I asked you how it goes."

Glacia's eyes moved to him. He was probably the only man of whom she had ever been afraid. It wasn't just that she knew his reputation. The deadliness that was within him seemed to hang around him in a faint, bitter aura.

Glacia said, "He's at a table."

"He suspect anything?"

"Of course not." Glacia gave Tray Marco a smile about as firm as she would have bestowed on a stray tiger. "I think he was impressed by your car."

"What kind of a line are you giving him?"

"Intellectual. I talked with him about his objective essence."

"His what?"

Forgetful Osborn came out of an absent-minded stare and said, "My dear girl, you'll have to speak the language of the criminal classes."

Tray Marco's eyelids sank and he put his cigarette between his lips then put his hands hard, palms flat, on the table.

He said, "What?" in a low voice.

Forgetful Osborn lost his grin suddenly.

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He said, "Heck, Tray, I was kidding!" earnestly.

LYMAN LEE arrived. He wore immaculate full dress and carried a monocle in his eye. He was far the handsomest man in the roof-club crowd.

He greeted Glacia, then asked, "Is it going all right?"

"Swell," she said.

Lyman Lee frowned. "We haven't been able to get everything set to take him. Not enough time. Tray is working on it. When we get set, Tray will give you a high sign, and you manage to talk to him privately and he'll tell you where to take Jones and what to do. Is that clear?"

Glacia nodded. "I'll watch for Tray." She frowned. "But after we take Jones, then what?"

Lyman Lee turned and looked at Harold Hover. "What about that, Hover?" he asked.

Hover licked his lips, and the lower part of his face seemed to want to shake. He opened him mouth, but he did not or could not say anything.

Lyman Lee moved his upper lip a little, contemptuously.

"Hover will probably get back his voice," he said, "when the police arrest and convict Jones for causing the death of the German liner captain."

Glacia grew pale. "What do you mean?"

Lyman Lee looked at her queerly.

"Nothing," he said. "You'd better go back to the boy friend."

Glacia departed.

A moment later, Lyman Lee moved away, and Forgetful Osborn followed him out of earshot of the others and touched his elbow.

"Let's see—what—I had something on my mind," Forgetful said absently. "Oh, yes. Tray Marco. How about us trying to get along without that guy?"

"Without him?"

"Tray Marco," said Forgetful, "gives me a hobgoblin complex."

"We need him," Lyman Lee said shortly.

Forgetful sighed. "Then," he remarked, "I still wish I was taking a boat for the South Seas. Because I'm telling you, this Jones is the kind of a set-up that backfires, and this Tray Marco ain't got no sense of humor a-tall."

JONES was glad to see Glacia come through the crowd toward his table and he arose to welcome her, as he'd seen gentlemen at the other tables around him doing for their ladies.

"With such polished courtesy," Glacia said in a tone of amazement, "I can hardly believe you never saw another human being until a few days ago."

Jones glowed.

Glacia tapped her water glass with a spoon, and another fellow whom she also called *"Garçon"* wrapped a towel around a bottle, extracted the cork with a pop and flourish, then poured out watery-looking liquid that was full of fizz. Jones took a sip, made a face.

"Champagne," Glacia said with a husky little laugh.

Jones eyed his glass and decided the occasion called for a quotation. "The expensive price of champagne," he announced, "is partially due to the breakage of the bottles caused by the pressure of fermentation."

There was a great deal of noise in the room, but it was a cheerful confusion, with a name orchestra doing its best, and the open floor in the center crowded with dancers. Jones leaned back and found that he was enjoying himself. A friendly spirit prevailed. He noticed this particularly because its warmth was directed toward himself. Men glanced at him, often with pleasant smiles, and the women regarded him with interest. He was pleased, and glowed, because the attention was healing balm on his raw apprehensions that his previous life had made him into something fundamentally different from the rest of humanity. It did not occur to him that the reason for the attention might be that he was a pleasant looking young man of remarkable physical build, accompanied by a gem-like girl.

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The lights dimmed, dancers went to their tables, and suddenly there was a round patch of brilliant white light in the center of the floor. The orchestra struck up softly, a young man appeared in the spotlight, bent close to a microphone, crooned a song. A long, thin comedian dressed as a pirate, took the other's place at the mike and recited jokes which were about the caliber of those Funny Pegger carried on the tip of his tongue.

Jones suddenly craned his neck. A line of girls had appeared, all kicking in unison, all remarkably undraped. He took several close looks before he concluded they did wear something. But he had never before seen so much undraped female—the girls, pretending to be captives of the pirate comedian, wore little ragged panties and not much else.

"Gracious!" Jones remarked.

He studied the dancers, and began to feel concerned about them. They looked like nice girls.

"Don't they," he asked, "have any more clothes than that?"

Glacia shrugged. "Less, if anything."

Jones shook his head pityingly. He placed a hand on the roll of thousand-dollar bills in his hip pocket, frowned, and stood up.

Glacia said, "Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

"I am," Jones replied gravely, "going to distribute some thousand-dollar bills among those poor girls."

Glacia's eyes popped.

"For pity's sake!" she gasped. "This isn't Turkey! You can't buy a harem outright!"

"I—"

"Although"— Glacia looked at the roll of thousand-dollar bills—"you might, at that."

"Oh, my!" Jones gulped. "You misunderstand me! I have thousand-dollar bills to give to needy persons. Those poor girls are obviously in need of clothing, and I intend to supply them."

"Sit down!" Glacia said in a small, cold voice.

Jones peered at her. He could tell something was wrong.

"Sit down!" Glacia said queerly.

Jones sat down.

"Those girls," Glacia said, "make a union wage scale of sixty dollars a week."

"Er—they do? Then why do they dress as they do?"

"That," Glacia said, "is art."

"Art?"

Jones sat down and thought for a moment.

"Art," he remarked, "is dexterity, skill, or the ability to achieve or perform certain actions, usually difficult, or requiring a knack." He considered further, then shook his head. "I fail to see where taking clothes off is art."

CHAPTER XXII

THOUSAND-DOLLAR BILLS.

JONES felt some embarrassment. A dictionary he had once memorized said a *faux pas* was a false step, or an act injurious to your reputation. He'd just accomplished one. He glanced at Glacia to see if she was laughing at him. She wasn't. He thought it very nice of her, and indicative of a character containing a great deal of virtue, kindness, and the common garden variety of horse sense. He suddenly remembered that he had been for some time in need of a person of judgment, experience, skill, and kindly toleration. Someone to whom he could bare his secret longings, and not get spiked with a word, or deflated with a second-hand gag.

"Glacia," he said.

"Yes, dear boy," Glacia responded.

"Er—earlier in the evening, I started to mention a matter, but it was sidetracked by something or other. I should like to broach the subject at this time."

"Do," Glacia invited warmly.

Jones fortified himself with a deep breath.

"I must give one hundred thousand dollars to needy persons," he said, "within the next thirty—er—twenty-seven days."

He waited for Glacia to tell him how

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many varieties of crazy he was. Glacia put a hand on his arm, and the hand squeezed a little.

"How wonderful!" she murmured. "I should so love to help you."

"I—what?"

"Help you," Glacia repeated.

"Oh," Jones said, "that is impossible. I am trying to prove I have judgment, according to the bargain with old—er—that is—I must do it all myself."

He'd come near telling her that he and old Polyphemus Ward had a deal. He sat for a moment with chin in palm and reviewed the difficulties of giving away thousand-dollar bills.

"The government," announced Jones, "expended for the relief of needy persons during the year 1935 the sum of three billion, sixty-eight million, eight hundred and three thousand, fifty-three dollars and twenty cents. I read that in a newspaper.

"Yes," Glacia said. "There have been rumors."

"They evidently found persons in need of such a sum."

"They claim they did."

"I," said Jones, "have not found even one needy person." He shook his head. "Conceivably the government has got them all."

He sat there and wrestled the question. He went into a dissecting session, took the matter apart, and examined its aspects.

"Hmmm," Jones said at last, thoughtfully.

DURING the course of the floor show, they were served food. Hitherto, Jones had subsisted on bear, seal, white whale, narwhal, fox, Arctic hare, auks, birds, bird-eggs, an occasional musk-ox, or other tidbit varied by clams dug from mud along the edges of glaciers. New York night club food was not quite the improvement he expected.

While a snappy-looking girl was handing Jones his hat and glaring at him because he failed to tip her—he didn't know he was supposed to—Glacia tucked her arm in his.

"Just what," she inquired, "was your thought in bringing up this matter of needy persons?"

"Why, I had no particular object, other than to discuss it. Discussion, you know, causes a plan to stand more clearly in one's mind." He smiled. "In catching a seal, I used to make it a practice to discuss my intended procedure aloud with myself. Seals are very wary animals. There is scientific basis for the belief that they sleep with their eyes open."

"I see," Glacia said.

The château of a town car wafted them around to a theater. They were late, of course, and it was first intermission, a crowd standing in front smoking. The usual collection of panhandlers was around, and the town car drew them to Jones like China attracts the Japanese.

But Jones ignored the outstretched palms.

Glacia looked curiously at Jones as they went inside. "Those people told you they were needy," she remarked.

"I have," Jones said, "formed an opinion on the subject of needy persons."

An usherette showed them their seats, and they saw a play about the vicissitudes of two agile-witted gentlemen who were attempting to produce a play on the money they were trying to get out of a man called the angel. Jones reflected that he had troubles which compared favorably with those the actors were encountering. The play ended, Glacia announced they were headed for a night club, that it was in the next block, and they would walk.

They reached the sidewalk, realized there was rumbling and whooping overhead, and Jones glanced up, forced to conclude the New York weather was as erratic as the human inhabitants of the place. Another rain was coming. The rain arrived before they had gone fifty paces, spattering big drops coming suddenly.

Jones and Glacia dashed for the nearest doorway, which happened to be the lobby entrance of an office building. They stood inside, watching the night sky empty itself of rain.

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There was a slight noise in the lobby, and Jones turned around.

An elderly lady with white hair was on her knees wielding a scrub brush on the lobby floor.

Jones looked at her with interest.

THE OLD lady breaking her back on the floor tiles was well past middle age, with a face that was rather pleasant in spite of the lines of fatigue. She had, in spite of the kind of work she was doing, a neat look.

Glacia turned and looked. She saw only an old scrubwoman, whereas Jones was seeing someone's Mother.

He was also seeing the Big Idea. The Big Idea that he had been looking for.

"Inspiration," Jones announced, "is the act of breathing, accomplished by elevating the chest walls and flattening the diaphragm muscle. Also a power which exerts a stimulating effect on the intellect."

Glacia frowned. She took a quarter from her purse.

"Go to the corner and call our car," she ordered shortly. "The large blue town car with the Japanese chauffeur."

The rain came down in moaning sheets that twisted and writhed, boiled on the sidewalks, gorged the gutters. Lightning jumped continuously in the sky, made glare and noise. The wind moaned, banged signs, filled the doorway with a boil of spray.

The old lady reached for the quarter. Evidently twenty-five cents meant something in her life.

"Er—just a moment," Jones said.

The woman smiled at Jones. She had a pleasant little smile. "I'd like to get your car," she said. "I don't get many chances to make extra money."

Jones liked her voice. It was sincere.

"I wonder," he remarked, "if you would mind telling me the amount of your salary."

The small old lady shrugged cheerfully. "It is all the work is worth. I have no kick coming, young man."

"You are satisfied?"

She studied him with birdlike earnestness. "There are two answers to your question, young fellow. If you are asking whether I am satisfied that I am getting paid what my little job is worth, the answer is yes. But if you want to know if I am satisfied with my position in life, the answer is no. Hardly." She chuckled pleasantly. "I'm one of those creatures in whom hope springs eternal."

"On what do you base your hopes, may I ask?"

"That's a funny question." She cocked her head to one side. "Yes, a strange question. But the answer is candy."

"Candy?"

"The best you ever tasted." She nodded emphatically. "Melts in your mouth. I make it. I make a little on my day off, and peddle it around, and put the money in the bank. When I have enough"—she looked enthusiastic—"I'll set up a business."

Glacia was getting impatient. She pecked at Jones' arm.

"You're not interested in her and her candy," Glacia said impatiently. "Let's get going."

"On the contrary," Jones declared, "I am interested to the extent of one thousand dollars."

The little old lady stared at Jones, puzzled.

"Just what are you driving at?" she inquired.

"A few minutes ago, I saw a play in a theater," Jones said thoughtfully. "In the play, there was an individual called the angel, who furnished the money. I presume I might be called the angel."

"Angel?"

"I propose," said Jones, "to furnish one thousand dollars for the candy business."

The old lady stared at Jones perplexedly. She shook her head and made a *tsk-tsk* noise.

"Young man," she declared, "you're crazy!"

Jones flushed. "I—that seems to be a general opinion not shared by myself." He made his voice as businesslike as he

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could. "I propose to supply one thousand dollars. I understand interest is charged. I shall not charge interest. I also understand security is usually demanded for borrowed money. I shall require no security."

He paused to let this sink in.

"But," he added, "I shall expect the money to be repaid as soon as the candy business can repay it."

THIS was a radical departure from previous efforts. He did not know how it would set with old Polyphemus Ward. But he had thought everything over, and come to a conclusion—namely, that giving a person money outright did no lasting good. He realized he did not know much about human nature. Still, if you gave a man money, the fellow would expect to be given more. That was a natural fact. If one polar bear slipped and broke his neck while you were hunting him, you automatically hoped they all would do that.

"What," asked the little old lady, "if I lose your thousand dollars?"

"In that case," said Jones, "you will have lost more than I."

The old lady pursed her lips. She nodded.

"I believe you are right." She smiled at Jones. "Young man, you're strange. But I don't believe you are the wool-head I thought."

A grin spread over Jones' face. It lasted until Glacia grabbed hold of his arm. Glacia's fingers bit him. Glacia was seeing herself robbed of a thousand dollars.

"Have you gone crazy?" she asked angrily.

Jones looked at her. He frowned.

"You do not approve?" he inquired.

Glacia's, "No!" was electric.

"That," said Jones, "is unfortunate. I intend to go ahead."

Something about the way he made the statement caused Glacia to swallow a great deal she had to say. It was like getting an unexpected peek at the Rock of Gibraltar through a fog.

"Your name?" Jones asked the little old lady.

Maud Thatcher was her name, and she lived in Brooklyn, and she supported a little grandson. "We've been getting along fine, the boy and I," she insisted.

She put the thousand-dollar bill in her stocking.

The rain had stopped by then. "I wish," Jones said, "to go home."

Glacia glanced at him thoughtfully. Her fingers kneaded the gaudy little bauble of an evening bag which she carried. She parted her lips twice without saying anything. "Of course," she said finally.

Jones opened the door of the blue town car without waiting for the Japanese in the uniform. He was experiencing a glow of competence, a genuine kind of a feeling as though he had been in the cold, and had finally come in where it was warm.

In the car he sighed happily.

After Jones went into Vix's apartment house, the Jap looked around expectantly, but Glacia didn't see him. She wasn't seeing anything in particular at the moment. She felt like the colored boy who was calling imaginary lions out of a hole for fun —and got a real one.

The Jap shrugged, put the car in gear, drove a block, and pulled up alongside a taxicab which had been trailing them. Tray Marco got out of the cab, followed by Lyman Lee, Paul Shevinsky, Harold Hover and Forgetful Osborn. These five birds of feather got into the town car with Glacia.

"Around and around," Tray Marco said to the chauffeur.

The Jap drove into Central Park.

Tray Marco was a man noted for taking a straight line to a given point; he did this so literally, that it would some day probably be the death of him. Neither did he waste words.

"We'll take him tomorrow night," he said. "The spot is my gambling house on Forty-ninth Street. He's hunting a crap game. We'll have it. Steer him there. Forgetful is going to be the house man."

Glacia did not look around and did not indicate by any particular sign that she either heard or was interested.

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Forgetful Osborn said, "I—ah—am going to wear a disguise."

Tray Marco reached over and touched Glacia. "What's the matter?"

"I—oh!" Glacia said, "Why, I—nothing. A little trouble inside, is all."

"Maybe," Forgetful said thoughtfully, "you caught it from me."

CHAPTER XXIII

GENIUS, INC.

JONES had been sleeping deeply, absolutely untroubled by the fact that last night he had spent a good part of the money he had decided to invest in Genius Jones, on Glacia. His was the kind of slumber that soothes away fevers of care, injects vim in jaded bodies, and puts its victims in danger of burning up if there is a fire. It was wonderful. Jones awakened from it with somebody else's hands around his throat.

"Urk!" he said. *"Wug!"*

He swung at random with both arms, kicked for good measure, rolled over and over wildly, and brought up against the living room wall with force. Then he sat up and looked at Funny Pegger.

"I was beginning to think," said Funny Pegger, "that life was extinct."

Jones felt of his neck. "You—ah—had hold of me?"

"Previously I tried hitting you with furniture."

Jones examined the window and concluded it was morning. He got up, stretched and began dressing. He had slept on the floor.

"What time did you call it a night?" asked Funny Pegger.

"Er—about two o'clock. I took a walk before coming in. I wanted to think. You were asleep and so I did not wake you."

The gag man stared at Jones anxiously. "How much money have you got left?"

"Forty-nine thousand dollars. A little less, in fact." Night club: thirty dollars. Theater tickets: twenty-two. Investment in Jones.

"Forty-nine—" The gag man missed strangling by a hair. "You got rid of a thousand dollars! A thousand! It must have been an evening!"

"It was not," Jones said, "entirely unproductive."

Leaving Funny Pegger to cogitate on this, Jones ambled into the bath and showered hot, then cold. Hot water was a luxury which he appreciated. He rubbed himself with a rough towel, and combed his hair, noting that the dye had not faded. Then he dressed and strode to the bedroom door and gave it a tap.

"If it's a telegram," Vix called sleepily, "I don't live here until noon."

"It is time," Jones announced, "that you were getting up."

"That man," Vix said wearily, "is back again!"

When she appeared in the bedroom door, she was sufficiently awakened, and a very bright and colorful article. She surveyed Jones, and puckered her forehead.

"A glass of hot water every morning," she remarked, "will make you feel like a tiger."

"I—"

"Especially," Vix added, "if somebody throws it on you while you're asleep."

Jones frowned earnestly.

"I am starting a campaign," he announced. "I wish to tell you about it."

"Shoot," Vix said. "I'm helpless."

JONES withdrew a few paces and surveyed Vix and Funny Pegger as a general might examine two soldiers before a battle. "I should like your cooperation," he declared.

"None from me!" Vix declared.

"Then," Jones said gravely, "I shall have to think of persuasive measures."

Vix took a step forward and peered at Jones. "Look here!" she said sharply. "What's happened to you?"

"Today," said Jones. "I form Genius, Incorporated."

He paused to approve of himself. He'd hoped that finally there would come a time in his career when he could make an announcement and not feel warmish when

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Vix examined him with those lively blue eyes and gave him a going over with her wit. The time had come. It was here—it was Genius, Inc. He basked in pleasant self-approval. One of his ideas had finally survived a test, assaying twenty-four carat, and it wouldn't matter whether Vix approved orally or not. The assay was an unconscious process conducted in Jones' mind; it satisfied himself enough that no one else mattered.

Jones turned to Funny Pegger.

"May I ask when your job of writing humor for the radio is to begin?" he inquired.

"Two weeks."

"Would you," asked Jones, "care to associate yourself with a project of mine in the meantime?"

"Say *no* to him!" Vix ordered.

Jones stated earnestly. "I do not think he will refuse."

"Eh?" Funny Pegger squinted. "You mean you'll take measures with me, too?"

"No," Jones said simply. "You are my friend."

The gag man examined his hands thoughtfully, then inserted them in his pockets. He grinned. "No man could pay me a higher compliment."

"You—ah—are with me?"

"I am," said Funny Pegger.

"You," Vix told the gag man, "are an impressionable quadruped of the genus *equus*. In other words, a sentimental jackass!"

Jones looked at Vix hopefully.

"I—what about you?" he inquired.

Vix started to show him the end of her chin, but didn't, and shrugged.

"Me, too," she said wearily. "I'm always a weak woman this early in the morning. Now, what about Genius, Inc.?"

Jones withheld the rest of his plan. He thought it a commendable piece of contriving, but at the same time he'd had painful experience with Vix and Funny Pegger—they were enthusiastic pin-stickers. He thought it just as well to give them one piece of the meat at a time.

They had breakfast, and Jones got acquainted with the grapefruit, a victual individual in taste, difficult to consume, unexpected in performance, none of these being qualities which met with his approval. After breakfast, he fired his first gun.

"Advertise," he announced, "comes from the French *avertir*, meaning to warn. Currently, it denotes the giving of public notice."

"As an old newspaperman," said Funny Pegger, "I can say that you hit the nail on the head."

"We are going to advertise."

"Advertise what?"

"Genius, Incorporated."

"Which?"

"That," Jones explained, "is the name I have decided to give my enterprise."

The gag man put down his coffee cup, wiped his mouth with his napkin, wiped his forehead, put the napkin down, leaned back and grasped firm hold of his chair. "Let's hear it. I've got an awful feeling."

"It can't be as awful as mine," Vix said.

Jones ignored their tone.

"We are," he announced, "going to advertise for people with ideas who wish to start small businesses of their own, but who lack the capital. I am going to supply capital, up to a thousand dollars, without charging interest, the money to be repaid whenever income warrants."

Funny Pegger frowned. "Is this what giving a hundred thousand dollars to needy people has developed into?"

"Exactly," Jones nodded. "I—ah—have decided that giving money to a person outright is undesirable, in fact wrong. It is something for nothing, contrary to the first law of existence. A gift degenerates the moral fiber of the person receiving it. I confess that it does not seem to me that man has yet sufficiently separated himself from the animal status to ignore fundamental laws of nature. I recall from my childhood the sled dogs off my father's expedition ship. I remember particularly the fact that, when we gave them meat, thereafter they sat around the igloo door, howling and whining for more meat.

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Whereas, if we did not give them meat, they foraged for themselves and grew just as fat, and in some cases fatter, and were always more contented."

Funny Pegger contemplated his coffee cup, picked it up and drank, then fell to looking at the cup again. "Somebody ought to tack up what you just said in the halls of Congress."

Vix pointed a spoon at Jones. "There's just two things wrong with it," she said.

Jones looked puzzled. "Two?"

"First, giving away one hundred thousand is crazy and I don't care what system you use."

"But—"

"Second," Vix said, "how are you going to tell the honest people from the moochers? How are you going to distinguish the dogs that want to hunt from those that want to whine for food? Kindly answer those two."

"Polyphemus Ward."

Vix jumped. She jumped rather more than Jones thought mention of the financier's name called for. Vix also looked somewhat strange.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked.

Jones arose.

"I shall endeavor to demonstrate," he announced.

TO get in contact with Polyphemus Ward, one could telephone his office and get in touch with one of thirty-seven assistant secretaries, and if an important person, be connected with one of eighteen secretaries, and if the caller was very important, he might get to talk to Lyman Lee, the financier's confidential secretary, but he was unlikely to get any further. The other system was to pick up the telephone, say the first large figure that came to mind, add the word *dollars,* and Polyphemus Ward would be on the line in short order. Old Polyphemus Ward was a beagle for dollars. Jones used the dollar system.

"You—again!" Polyphemus Ward yelled. "Say, I told you not to bother me until you'd made a go of our deal, or had flopped! What are you calling *me* for? Goodbye!"

"There is," Jones said, "a favor you can do for me."

"What? Favor? *Me?*"

"There is," Jones said patiently, "a matter which I believe you would not care to have publicized."

A Vesuvian sound came over the telephone wire. "If you mean that business of my hundred thousand you're giving away," the financier yelled, "I'll tie knots in your arms! I'll wring your neck if you tell anybody!" He mentioned more that he would do and went into his background of cowpunching and hard-rock mining for words.

Jones interrupted. "If Wall Street heard about the matter, they'd think you had gone crazy. Er—wolves always eat a wounded comrade."

"You blackmailer!"

"I wish," Jones said, "to borrow the private detective agency which you have for some time employed to search for your missing daughter, Janice."

Mention of Janice was always cold water on old Polyphemus Ward. The snarl went out of him, and like a man dazed by a blow, he must have misunderstood, for: "You've found some trace of Janice?" he asked hoarsely.

Jones frowned at the telephone mouthpiece. Men were strange things. Here was a ranting old dollar-magnet with the qualities of a crab, including the shell, and he had a soft spot. He would loot an international banking ring with high glee, trim the budget of a squawling European dictator with gusto, and if someone shot at him, he would reach for the six-shooter he probably kept in his desk drawer. But Polyphemus Ward's daughter had left him because she was afraid his contrariness was contagious. She'd vanished; gone off to get human, like other people. And if she stayed away long enough; it might be that Polyphemus Ward would get human, too.

"I am not," Jones said, "engaged in a hunt for your daughter. I merely wish to

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use your detectives. I—er—think you will consent to that."

"You scamp!"

"You will send the chief of your detectives to me at once."

"Yes. Yes, of course—I mean—dammit! Who do you think you are giving orders to?"

"To an old dollar-trap with more money than manners," Jones responded. "I trust you will comply with my wishes at once."

"Hell you say! I'm through with you. Goodbye!"

"The address," Jones said, "is Number Twelve Fiftieth Avenue."

"When I get hold of you," yelled Polyphemus Ward, "I'll stamp on you so hard you'll have to unbutton your shoes to breathe! Goodbye, you idiot! Er—are you in any fresh trouble? If you are, I've got good lawyers."

"Thank you," Jones said. "But I—ah—once read a lawbook."

FUNNY PEGGER got up and made a quick circle around the room, holding his head with both hands, then fell in a chair and threw up his arms. He looked heavenward.

"Don't, don't, *don't* do this to me!" he yelled. "I can't stand it! Anyway, dear Lord, I don't deserve it!"

"Eh—what have I done now?" Jones inquired, puzzled.

"Just," said the gag man, "tied knots in the lion's tail. Don't you know old Polyphemus Ward eats babies? Don't you know he's the only guy Mussolini is scared of? Don't you know that—oh, bird-cages! I give up!"

Jones shook his head seriously. "All I did was secure the aid of private detectives to investigate applicants of Genius, Incorporated."

"Genius, Incorporated," said Funny Pegger, "is another thing that worries me."

Jones frowned. "It is our new company for loaning out one thousand dollars to a person."

"That," Funny Pegger groaned, "is all this day needs."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MORE THE SCREWIER

DESPITE predictions, by six o'clock in the afternoon, everyone was enthusiastic. The fact that people read afternoon newspapers had already started the firm of Genius, Incorporated, to functioning. There was still somewhat less than forty-nine thousand dollars in Jones' pocket, but only because the private detectives he had extorted from Polyphemus Ward needed time to investigate applicants.

GENIUS, INC.
Will Loan up to $1,000 without Interest or Security to Any Honest Person Who Wants to Go into Business for Himself.

This was the advertisement which Funny Pegger inserted in the daily papers at Jones request, and it was evidently good sugar, because applicants arrived like buckshot, including a percentage whose interest subsided when they heard they would be investigated by private detectives. But there was real grist left for the mill. Among the applicants were: An elderly and almost blind chemist who had a clever idea for making self-lighting cigars, a woman who wanted to raise chickens, a lobster fisherman who wanted to buy a boat and traps and go back to his trade, and a soda-jerk who was out of work, but who knew where he could start a soft-drink stand for a thousand dollars. A man wanted to breed cats, a mechanic needed tools, a fellow wanted a small filling station, and five Greeks desired to go into the lunchroom business. Seven Italians wanted fruit stands, three Irishmen thought they could make a living in the trucking business, and two Chinamen yearned for laundries. These people were typical human beings, so some of them would doubtless lose a thousand dollars and others would go ahead and get rich, while some would get jitters and back out, before they got started.

The chief of the private detectives was a middle-aged man, rotund, placid of face, neat of attire, his one noticeable peculiarity being a haircut that would be called a

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crock job in the farming regions. Watson was his name. Funny Pegger instantly dubbed him, "Doctor."

Watson said: "We'll get after these people. You want to know if they're worth risking one thousand on? Is that it?"

Funny Pegger nodded. "That's Jones' idea, as near as I can make him out." The gag man frowned. "Look, Doc, Jones wants you to make a duplicate set of your reports and turn them over to Polyphemus Ward."

The detective tamped tobacco in a short pipe, drew in smoke and laughed it out. "Old Polyphemus," he said, "is running true to form."

Funny Pegger agreed, "The old reprobate is always running somebody."

"Men don't fool him." Watson smoked thoughtfully. "He's got the guts to back his judgment. I guess that's the difference between Polyphemus Ward and guys like you and me. Now you take me. Damned if I would take a fellow I found on an iceberg and give him one hundred thousand dollars to give away, just to find out if he had common sense enough to handle a job I had in mind for him."

"Yeah," agreed the gag man absentmindedly. "Me neither—what? *What?"*

Watson peered at Funny Pegger. "Is something wrong?"

"I—uh—oh, my!" Funny Pegger beat the left side of his chest with his right fist.

"I used to have them spells myself," Watson said sympathetically. "But when I laid off seventy-five-cent-a-pint whisky, they left me."

"I—whew! Great grief!" Funny Pegger got up shakily. "I—goodbye! See you tomorrow!"

THEY had rented a pair of furnished offices in a more or less ratty Forty-fifth Street building as a cradle for the newborn organization of Genius, Inc., and into the second of these sancta Funny Pegger went staggering in search of Jones. He peered around, squinting as if there wasn't enough light, and saw that Jones and Vix had gone, after which he rushed out of the building. All the way to Vix's apartment, he either made mumbling noises, or pleaded with the taxi driver for more speed. He tore into Vix's living room and gasped, "Where is he?"

"If you mean *it,"* Vix said, "it's in the kitchen feeding itself. When it's not getting in trouble, it's usually feeding itself."

"Shhhh!" Funny Pegger hissed dramatically.

The glance Vix gave Funny Pegger changed from casual to blue-eyed intentness. There was heat and dampness on the gag man's moonish face, obviously much animation inside him.

"I had a hunch," Vix said, "you'd get pixilated before this was all done."

She turned away, shaking her head.

"Shhh!" said Funny Pegger. "I just found out where he got the hundred thousand."

"Who'd he rob?" Vix looked blank, then concern jumped over her face. "Look here! He didn't—didn't—or *did* he?"

"Polyphemus Ward!"

"What do you mean?"

"Old Polyphemus gave it to him. It's a test of whether Jones gets a job. *The* job!"

"And *the* job is what?"

"I forgot to tell you," Funny Pegger explained excitedly. "Polyphemus is gonna hire a man to administer his fortune to philanthropies. He's going to give the man an outright gift of a million to keep him honest. He told me about it one time. He must have told that detective, too, and told him he had Jones in mind, because the sleuth took it for granted that I knew, and he let it slip—"

Vix looked queer. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just found out—"

"I mean about Polyphemus Ward giving his money away!" Vix's voice edged. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—"

Vix took handfuls of Funny Pegger's coat lapels. "Maybe you thought it didn't concern me at all?" she shrieked.

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"Uh—shhh!" Funny Pegger admonished. "He'll hear you!"

Vix inhaled deeply. "Of all the low-grade intellects! You—you monkey!"

Jones appeared in the door. The way Vix and Funny Pegger dropped everything and stared at him made him feel uncomfortable.

"Er—monkey," he remarked. "The most interesting monkey is the howling monkey of Central America, which is equipped with a peculiar enlargement of the hyoid and laryngeal apparatus which permits it to make unearthly howling noises."

"We've just found out," Funny Pegger told him, "where you got that hundred thousand."

Jones broke out in smiles.

"I'm certainly glad of that," he declared. "Keeping my promise not to reveal the matter to anyone was a great nuisance."

There was a knock on the door.

FUNNY PEGGER and Vix looked at at Jones, and Jones looked blank, then the knock came again, and all eyes went with one accord to the handiest window.

"Probably police," Funny Pegger hissed.

"They still want to arrest me, I believe," Jones said nervously.

Knuckles gave the door a third banging, and the sound sent Vix a step toward the window before she tightened her lips and approached the door. 'What is it?"

"Telegram."

Vix reached for the door latch, but Funny Pegger, rushing over, blocked her hand and hissed: "An old phony to get doors open!"

The gag man said loudly: "Shove it under the door!"

A telegram whisked over the threshhold, and Funny Pegger, grinning foolishly, opened the door and signed a yellow delivery slip presented by a pint-sized urchin with freckles who stood outside.

"For you," the gag man told Jones.

Jones took the telegram and scrutinized it curiously. "The telegraph," he stated, "is an invention attributed to Samuel Morse in 1832, but history of its development actually goes back to Musschenbroech in the sixteenth century."

Vix stamped a foot.

"Willies," she said, "are what quotations give people! Open that thing. That's what it's for."

Jones painstakingly extracted contents of the yellow envelope, and ran his eyes over a row of words on a tape stuck to the yellow blank.

"Well, well," he remarked.

Vix picked the sheet from his fingers. It said:

CALLING FOR YOU AT NINE TONIGHT. I HAVE LOCATED A CRAP GAME FOR YOU. LOVE.

GLACIA.

Vix frowned. "Who is Glacia?"

Funny Pegger said, "Daughter of Countess Maria Montignal de Grandrieu. You know her."

Vix puckered her forehead. "Yes, I remember her. But how did she meet our amazing friend?"

"The countess," said Funny Pegger, "mooched a trip on the yacht for herself and her chick."

Vix went to a small modern metal-table, and picked up a cigarette and struck a match, then turned to eye Jones as she drew flame against the tobacco. She seemed to be scrutinizing him in search of mysterious characteristics. She shook her head, and pointed the cigarette at Jones, but looked at Funny Pegger.

"I don't see it," she said. "But it's hanging on to him somewhere. It has to be!"

"What?" asked Funny Pegger.

"I think it must be *Nepeta cataria,*" Vix said.

Jones frowned; the zany goings-on of this pair having him baffled again.

"Nepeta cataria," he remarked, "is ordinary catnip, for which cats have a peculiar fondness."

"Yes," Vix said. "I know. I was thinking of Glacia."

"Also a million dollars," Funny Pegger added.

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The wrinkles of Jones' frown got deeper. A muscle gathered in a knot on each side of his jaw, and without further words, he turned and stalked into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him with a bang.

Vix stared at the door. Then she looked at Funny Pegger. Her blue eyes were incredulous.

"What got into him? Always before, he stuck around and let us march back and forth across his quivvering flesh."

"Glacia," said Funny Pegger.

"Eh?"

"Jones," said Funny Pegger, "is open to education on every subject except the Countess's chick. Anything you say against Glacia tends to bring out the porcupine in him."

WITH an impatient gesture, Vix stubbed the red nose of her cigarette against an ash tray, then obeyed the universal impulse of womankind when confronted by a problem; she went to a mirror to give herself a critical examination. She moulded a tendril of bright hair into place with a fingertip.

"I don't understand it," she said.

"Neither do I." The gag man grinned. "You've got Glacia trimmed seven ways from the bat."

Vix said quickly, "I didn't mean that!"

"Oh!"

"If you think I care whether that female goblin gets him," Vix snapped, "you're crazy."

Funny Pegger carefully took his grin off. "Oh, well, for the sake of harmony, old man Pegger will let you think you're fooling him. Suppose we discuss that telegram. It worries me."

"I wonder what he's doing?" Vix frowned at the kitchen door. "Maybe he's skipped out the back way!" she exclaimed.

She ran to the door, opened it, then looked relieved. Jones was in the kitchen, and also half inside the electric refrigerator, exploring.

"This," he remarked, "is an interesting mechanical device."

Vix sighed. "I'm glad to see you've got something harmless like a refrigerator on your mind."

Jones smiled. "By the way," he said, "I noticed during my expedition last night that most of the gentlemen wore the kind of garb which I have heard Mr. Pegger designate as toad suits."

"Toad suits?"

"He means," Funny Pegger explained, "evening dress. A tux. Suit of tails. Soup and fish. Monkey plumage."

"If he continues to get his vocabulary from you," Vix stated, "he's going to have a honey."

Jones interposed, "What I was trying to ask is this: May one acquire such raiment at this time of the evening?"

"They rent dress suits, if that's what you mean," Funny Pegger admitted. "You just telephone one of the places you'll find listed in the classified telephone directory."

"Thank you," Jones said. "I shall do so."

Vix said: "Wait a minute! Does this yen for a dress suit mean you're going out with Glacia tonight and visit that crap game?"

"Why, yes," Jones admitted.

Vix's lips tightened. "Listen, if you think we'll let—"

Funny Pegger took hold of her arm and pinched.

"Confucius," he said, "was the Chinese wise man who said it is a wise dog that knows when not to bark at the tiger."

Vix had much on her mind and a choice assortment of words with which to make delivery, but she held back, allowing Funny Pegger to tow her into the living room and close the kitchen door so that Jones would not overhear.

"I'd like to wring his neck!"

"Shhh!" the gag man admonished soberly. "This is an emergency, and for once I'm not lacking."

Vix frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Listen," Funny Pegger ordered, "to a masterly idea, as follows: First, I volunteer to go out and get friend Jones his toad suit."

"But—"

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"And I'll buy," interrupted the gag man, "something to make the guy sleep. We slip him the Mickey Finn at dinner, and our troubles are over."

Vix peered at him. "Are you sane?"

"It's a swell idea."

"So was Haile Selassie's idea that he could whip the Italians."

"This will work."

"Drug him, you mean?"

"Sure."

Vix sighed. "We've got to do something to him so we can get some sleep."

Funny Pegger picked up his hat. "I'm off on my errand of mercy."

THE gag man proceeded to a drug store and made the discovery that sedatives were sold only on prescription from a physician, but profiting by that knowledge, he straightway visited a doctor in the neighborhood, and described an imaginary but terrific case of jitters which, he moaned, had kept him awake night after night. Unfortunately the doctor turned out to be an osteopath who was an enthusiastic bone-cracker as well as a high-pressure salesman, so that Funny Pegger, before he could help himself, was stumbling out of the place, minus five dollars, and also possessor of a remarkably disjointed feeling. Having satisfactorily deceived a second doctor with trumped-up symptoms, the gag man secured a prescription, got it filled, and returned to the apartment, picking up en route a full dress suit somewhat near Jones' dimensions.

Jones scrutinized the black dress attire, his face expressionless.

"Crow," he remarked, "is a large glossy black, oscine bird of *Corvus* and allied genus, having loud vocal equipment and an appetite for young corn. Crow is also a type of door knocker, a croaking sound, a cry of exultation, the southern constellation of Corvus, and a tribe of Indians."

He retired to the bedroom to don his new plumage.

Funny Pegger winked at Vix and exhibited the package of sleeping drug.

"How are you going to give it to him?" Vix asked.

"We'll have hot chocolate for dinner."

"But he may notice the taste."

"We'll tell him," said Funny Pegger, 'that it's the way chocolate should taste. He never had any chocolate before." The gag man considered. "Here, I'll stick the stuff in this vase until we're ready for it. Then I'll help you get dinner. . . ."

* * *

The singing sound had been there for some time—it seemed to Funny Pegger that the interval had been several hours. It did not change tone, and was like something made by a bumblebee with half-portion wings, and it had become monotonous to the point where there was an urgent necessity for taking measures. If measures were not taken in a hurry, there might be a disaster, because the singing noise had gotten synchronized with the vibrating point of his skull or something, and was about to pop it wide open, the way they said Caruso could shatter wine glasses with his voice. With a mighty efford, a Herculean summoning of energies, Funny Pegger got awake. At first he could see nothing.

The side of his face felt gummy. It had, he saw, been resting in a plate of soup.

He peered at a hazy something that was located across the table, winking both eyes, and finally with the aid of his fingers, dispelled enough of the haze to recognize the object as Vix.

Suddenly Funny Pegger sprang up and as promptly fell to the floor. He got up, held to chairs and stumbled into the kitchen, then sloped into the bedroom, and finally came rubber-legging back into the living room.

"Vix!" he yelled. "Jones is gone!"

Vix stirred a trifle.

"Vix!" bellowed Pegger. "He switched the stuff and we drank it. He's gone! Oh, damn the luck! Him and his forty-nine thousand dollars are both gone!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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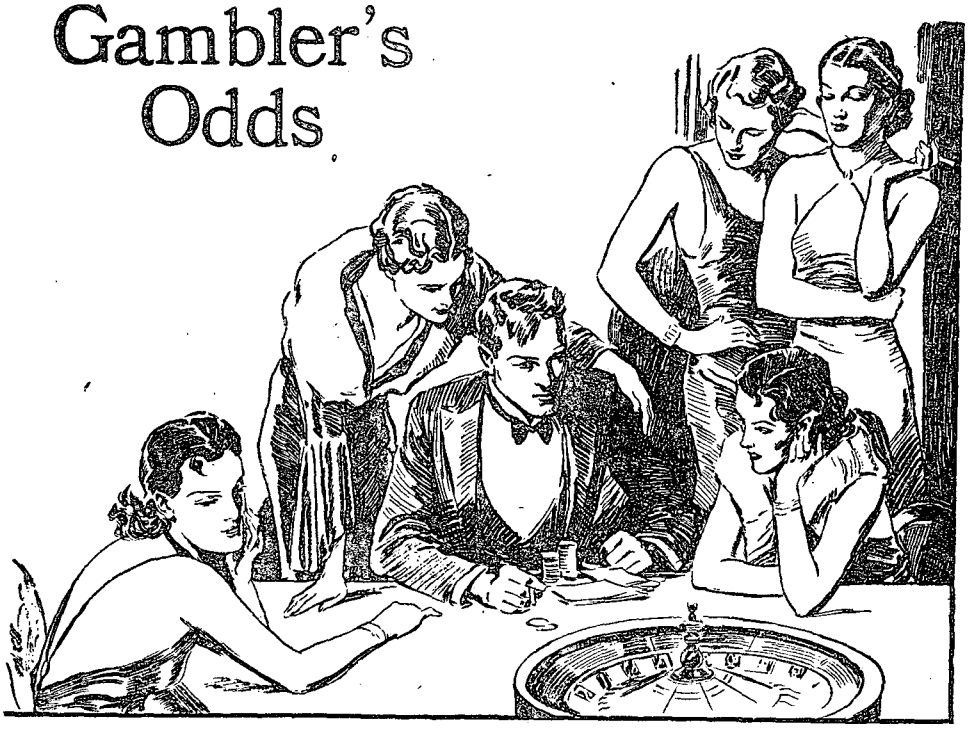
Gambler's Odds



By T. T. FLYNN

Author of "Santa Fortuna," "High Steel," etc.

SHE'D been crying when she came into Dan Mulvaney's place out on the north road, where you could have draw, stud, blackjack, dice or roulette, any limit. And get home with your winnings; Dan Mulvaney saw to that.

For a young man, Dan was doing well. But then at the age of twelve he had been pitching pennies, rolling dice at fourteen, and at seventeen he was a top man with cards. Some men ride to hounds, keep polo ponies, angel Broadway plays; gambling was Dan's sport and excitement, and the good-natured fire of it was in his blood. So when this moist-eyed girl walked into the private office and closed the door I wondered.

Customers and Dan's lady friends I knew. This girl was a stranger. I got up to leave. Strange things happened in this little office, and she had the look. She was different. She didn't belong here in Dan Mulvaney's place, where the best people considered it smart to spend the evening.

She was pretty—but pretty girls overran the place. She was smart, clothes expensive, and that was no novelty. She was pale, a little too thin, and it helped her smartness.

I admit I'm hard-boiled; for a moment I doubted the truth. This girl was *good*. Her mouth was tender and sweet, and the high clear pride in her eyes as she looked at Dan Mulvaney made me feel cheap. I took off my hat as I started to leave.

"Don't go, Whitey," said Dan in a low voice. He was on his feet by then.

"Hello, Mary," he said.

I've never heard that note in Dan Mulvaney's voice. He had lighted a cigarette, snapped the dead match in two and was slowly rolling the pieces between his fingers.

"I want to see you alone, Dan."

"Whitey is one man I can trust, Mary."

The best of the women hadn't touched Dan. Men liked him. With their women he was gallant and correct. And now this blue-

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eyed girl with her challenging pride had walked in and smashed that aloofness that I had always thought was Dan Mulvaney's shield and self.

Dan's eyes were on her face. I'd never seen that look before. He was hungry, with a hunger his excellent chef could never satisfy.

I knew Dan. I'd sat with him through nights when the black moods brought all guards down and the inner man was open to a friend. But this hunger had been hiding behind the gayest triumphs and blackest moods.

HE introduced us quietly: "Mrs. Griswold, Mr. Farrell." And her nod dismissed me with the veiled hostility she had brought into the room for Dan Mulvaney.

"You know why I'm here, Dan."

"Do I, Mary?" said Dan quietly. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you, no."

They were so polite and formal. And that part of them beyond my reach was brittle, electric.

I was staring at her. "Griswold," I said belatedly. *"Griswold."*

She looked at me. "Yes," she said.

And some things that had often puzzled me began to have a vague and startling meaning.

"Cigarette, Mary?" Dan offered.

She shook her head. Dan put his cigarette to his lips. His hand was steady. He inhaled deeply, as if from somewhere he was trying to draw strength.

She waited. Dan waited. It was Dan who spoke first: "Why should I know, Mary? It's been a long time."

She said, "Four years," and the years were a gulf across which they eyed each other.

They were silent again. And again Dan spoke first, making a helpless gesture with the cigarette. "How can I know what's on your mind?"

"You know," she repeated. "It's Harry."

"I see him now and then," said Dan.

Her antagonism was suddenly bitter and angry. "You've done enough," she flared. "You've kept him in money—more money than he's ever known before. And it's changed him."

Dan was watching her steadily. "Are you sure it's the money?" he asked.

I thought for a monment she was frightened. But her chin was up and the pride was about her like a shielding cloak as she ignored Dan's question.

"Easy money has gone to Harry's head. It must stop."

"Some things," said Dan slowly, "are hard to stop. Harry is lucky. One can't do much against luck, can one? Some men always win."

They had forgotten me. They were talking behind their words. The gulf between them was not wide enough to keep them apart.

"This is the only place where Harry wins," said Mary Griswold, and it was an accusation.

Dan's smile was faint. "Harry doesn't seem to have much trouble winning from me."

"Why do you do it?" she demanded heatedly.

"Do what, Mary?"

She took a deep breath. "I've tried to live my own life. You haven't left me alone. You've known what would happen. And yet you've gone on."

"What has happened?" asked Dan slowly.

SHE flushed, and her eyes were stormy with suppressed anger and shame, and her voice shook. "You want to hear me say it, don't you? Harry thinks he's a clever gambler. It's gone to his head. I'm only another of his women now, and he can't be bothered. He's shamed me, insulted me, abused me. Everything I thought I would have has gone away as the money came easier and easier. I wasn't sure, but I am now; Harry only wins at your games. You've let him win, knowing what it would do. I despise you. I'm humbling myself to ask you to let Harry alone."

She was biting her lip, her chin was trembling.

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"Harry abuses you?" Dan's face had no expression.

She nodded, still biting her lip.

Dan stared at the floor. "Do you think Harry will straighten up?"

"Of course!"

"You want him broke?"

"I do," said Mary Griswold. "I want to make a new start."

Dan was smiling faintly as he looked up. "Is your car here, Mary, or did you come in a taxi?"

"I have my own car. A big gambler's wife rates a flashy car," she said, and the bitterness of it was eating her when she left.

Dan closed the door carefully and came to the desk without looking at me. He fumbled for a cigarette in the humidor, and flicked the gold-banded desk lighter, and smiled crookedly across the flame, his eyes on me.

"Well, Whitey?"

I took a long breath myself. "You would be a fool! A cheap punk like Griswold staying fat on your money and telling the world what a smart guy he is!"

"Plenty of them win," said Dan. "My games are straight. House odds are all I want."

I thought about Griswold and got madder. "Odds, hell! I know gambler's odds! She was right. You've been running crooked games with Griswold."

"I *never* ran a crooked game!"

"What do you call letting a punk like that win from you? I've seen him. Usually it's when you take over a game he's bucking. Have you been trying to trip him up?"

Dan's smile smoothed out to sadness. "How could I change him, Whitey? I wanted her to have the best of everything—and all I've done is make her hate me."

"Rats!" I said. "She loves you."

Dan gave me a startled look. His hand shook as he took the cigarette from his mouth. "Whitey," he said huskily, "don't kid me about Mary."

"You cluck!" I said. "You big-hearted, blind cluck! Haven't I always been on the level with you? She's always loved you if it's lasted all these years."

"But she married him," said Dan, as if he were groping in an old fog he'd never been able to penetrate.

"What of it? They took out a license and said some words and they were married. Maybe she wasn't so old then and couldn't spot a phony. Maybe you had something to do with it. You haven't always been a tin god."

"I was a gambler," Dan muttered. "Mary hated it—and I wouldn't quit. I was trying to make a stake and open up my own place. It kept me pretty busy."

"You can't make a dead duck fly," I said. "She married him. So what?"

"But if she doesn't love him?"

"I pass," I said, sliding off the desk. "Pick up the dice, you big blond mushhead. Can't you see she's got to have that punk come to her for comfort? What does it matter who she loves? She's got to live with her self-respect."

Dan walked out of the office and out of the building and drove away, and the only word he left with me was: "Call my apartment, Whitey, when Griswold shows up."

I grunted.

IT was two days before I saw Dan again —two nights before Griswold showed up with two blondes, and neither was his wife.

When I saw that jaunty overdressed phony swagger in and toss his natty derby and coat to the check girl, and shrug the padded shoulders of his pinched-in coat, and rub his manicured hands together as he made a grinning crack to one of the blondes. I wanted to grab him by the neck. But I telephoned Dan Mulvaney's apartment. Dan must have been waiting.

"He's here," I told Dan.

"Thanks, Whitey."

It was after ten. The place was filling for the night. Griswold and his blondes were at the roulette table. Griswold had bought himself a stack of chips and was playing reds and numbers with elaborate carelessness. I watched him, and wondered

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how any girl could have taken him instead of Dan Mulvaney.

Dan's blond hair always looked a little rumpled, and the honest angles of his face were almost homely; but you warmed to that clean-cut cheerful guy with his straightforward ways.

Griswold was smooth, good-looking; when he laughed it was too loud, and his gestures were always elaborate. You could imagine him studying himself complacently in a mirror. You knew he liked himself.

In twenty minutes Dan arrived. He must have broken all the traffic rules.

I was anxious, but Dan came in without a worry on his face, smiling as he greeted friends on his way in. As usual he wore his dinner clothes carelessly, and his blond hair looked as if he had been running fingers through it, and Dan was a handsomer man than Griswold could ever be. Dan's looks came from inside.

He sobered when I met him. "Griswold still here, Whitey?" he asked.

"Roulette," I said. "He's got a couple of blondes."

"Mary isn't here?" asked Dan quickly.

"Why ask? You know she isn't. He's never brought her here."

"Or anywhere much," said Dan. He clapped me on the arm. "Don't look so sour, Whitey."

I said, "I'm mad. Do something about that guy before I lose my temper and muss him up."

Dan grinned. "If it's any news to you," I went on, "I've asked a few questions around. Blondes aren't the only thing Griswold goes for. He's playing big-shot to a string of third-rate pals who fade around a corner when they see a cop coming."

"I know it," said Dan and went into the big room.

I had a feeling something was up.

DAN took a game now and then to keep his hand in and jolly the customers. He took the roulette wheel now. Better-looking men were in the crowd, but none stood out like Dan with his rumpled hair, his laughter and good-natured asides to the players. He spoke often to Griswold, kidding him, recalling past runs of luck.

Griswold was the cynosure of all eyes. Color came into his face; he spoke louder, bet heavier, doing his act for the blondes and the audience. He lost a hundred-dollar bet.

Dan raked in the chips and paid the winners, kidding Griswold. "You can't win all the time."

"I've done pretty well since you've known me," said Griswold, showing his teeth as he let that one go under the belt deliberately.

Dan's smile remained. "Some day I'll give you a run for your money."

"I doubt it," said Griswold.

"Your bets, ladies and gentlemen," said Dan. "Staying on the black, Mr. Griswold?"

"And another hundred," said Griswold.

Dan spun the wheel, and red came up and Dan chuckled. "You might have luck with dice, if you care to risk the money tonight," suggested Dan.

"*Risk* it?" Griswold sneered.

"Name your limit and we'll top it," Dan tempted. "That is, if you're not afraid of a real game."

Griswold was playing to the crowd. Dan had smoked him into the open and built a fire under his vanity.

"Why not?" said Griswold. "I might as well get your money tonight as any other time."

Dan turned the roulette wheel back to the houseman and joined Griswold, then he beckoned to me.

"Get me ten thousand from the safe, Whitey. We'll use cash instead of chips."

Griswold wet his lips. "I haven't got a bankroll along."

"Your checks have always been good," said Dan, smiling. But Griswold got it. His checks had better be good.

They took Number Two table by the side wall. Griswold's blondes twittered beside him, and half the crowd at the roulette table drifted over to watch. Dan rolled a handful of dice across the table for Griswold to inspect.

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"Do you want a cup?" Dan chuckled.

Dice experts got that dig. A good man's hands could talk to the dice; if Griswold called for a cup he was nervous, doubtful. He paired two dice, tried them, rolled a seven and grinned.

"Bank me for five grand, Mulvaney, and fade me for five hundred."

"A thousand," Dan egged him on.

"Why not?"

ANYTHING can happen in dice. They tell you honest dice make the game equal, and Old Lady Luck calls the winners. Maybe. I'd seen Dan take honest dice and call his shots by the dozen. He knew the tricks.

Griswold rolled eight and made it, let his money ride and took it all with a seven. He picked up half, took Dan's next money with another seven, and rolled for three thousand and missed. Dan had the dice and went out on his first roll.

I went to the safe for another ten thousand . . . and fifteen minutes later went again for ten thousand more.

Griswold was hot. Dan was missing his points. Fifties, hundreds and five hundreds piled before Griswold like a snowbank rising in a blizzard.

The two blondes were gasping delightedly. Griswold was flushed, chortling. The other games were almost deserted as the crowd gathered to watch a big winner. In the glare of the overhead light Dan was unruffled, smiling.

I knew better. This couldn't keep up. Griswold was pushing the stakes higher. Dan was egging him on—and steadily losing. Griswold would own the house if this kept up. And I knew Dan could take that flushed triumphant phony without batting an eye.

"What the hell!" I said to myself. "He promised her he'd *clean* the guy!" My palms were wet. Me, Whitey Farrell! Dan was draining the safe.

Don't tell me a dice game can't have drama. I saw it that night at Dan Mulvaney's. Griswold's winning streak tapered off. He lost a little, won a little: then gradually Dan began to make points. That blizzard of treasury notes began to drift back across the table.

Griswold wrote a five-thousand-dollar check. . . . Then another, and another, and a twenty-three hundred check—and I knew he was finished at the bank. He was quiet now, pale, perspiring.

"Do you own a house?" Dan kidded him.

Griswold moistened his lips, shook his head.

"What are your automobiles worth?" asked Dan.

"Six thousand," said Griswold, blinking.

"Write a bill of sale on a blank check for ten thousand for your cars and furniture," Dan dared him with a chuckle. "You may break me yet—if you don't weaken."

Griswold was still playing to the crowd. He wrote the bill of sale and lost the money in twenty minutes.

His hands were shaking as he gripped the table. "It's funny, Mulvaney—there's something crooked about this."

Dan paused in gathering up the money.

Silence had fallen. Dan's face was white, hard; and I knew what he did in the next moment might tag him for years. Influential and wealthy people were watching.

Dan looked at them. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said quietly, "in the morning I will give the profit from this play to the Community Chest. This man will not come here again."

Someone clapped approvingly; in a moment Dan was getting an ovation.

GRISWOLD left with his blondes; and I was grinning when I joined Dan in the office. Dan was staring at the money he had dropped on the desk.

"Don't try that again," I begged. "I was weak before you began to educate those dice."

"It was luck, Whitey," said Dan slowly. "Every throw was honest."

Then I *was* weak.

"Do you mean you almost let that guy

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take your bankroll when you could have stopped him from the first?"

"I had to do it without any tricks, Whitey."

"Oh, my!" I said. "With the run of luck he had!"

"Forget it," Dan said. "He's broke."

"I'll never forget it," I groaned. "You giving that phony a break. What would he have given you?"

"Forget it," said Dan. "It's all over."

But it wasn't over. That hunger was on Dan's face again. The only break he wanted was from Mary Griswold. I wondered if he'd get it. She could have telephoned her thanks. She didn't. Four days later I asked, "Have you got the furniture?"

"The warehouse people telephoned that some furniture is stored for me," said Dan indifferently.

Mary Griswold could have told him. I wondered what kind of a girl would let that hunger stay on Dan's face for a phony like Griswold. And I wondered how long it would take Dan to get her out of his mind.

I didn't suspect the truth until some nights later when Dan and I were driving in after closing. The motor sputtered, died. Dan stopped off the concrete and tried the starter without luck.

"Plenty of gas," I said. "It must be in the ignition."

Dan reached for the flashlight. "Let's have a look."

We had the hood up, and the wiring looked all right, and I was tired already from the thought of a long walk on that lonesome highway when headlights came up from behind.

"Ten dollars to one they won't stop," I said. "They never do at night when you need 'em."

But I waved, and the car slowed and stopped. It was a small sedan with two men inside.

"How about giving us a lift to a garage?" I said.

The man beside the driver said, "Sure. What's the trouble?" He stepped out. Dan joined us—and the next moment we had a gun in our faces.

The man with the gun had a handkerchief on. His voice had a slight accent but that didn't tell me anything.

Calmly Dan said, "Get it over with."

The driver stepped out, muffled in a topcoat and a mask also, and his automatic covered us as the first man got our guns and growled, "Where's the money?"

So this hadn't just happened. They knew us, knew Dan usually carried bank money into town at night. Our car, I guessed, hadn't stopped accidentally after all.

"On the floor in front," said Dan.

I heard the first man's grunt of satisfaction as he found the fat leather briefcase filled with money. Dan was staring at the second man.

"Don't be a fool, Griswold," he said in a low voice.

Griswold shot Dan.

I JUMPED for safety, ducking around the back of their automobile. I'd get it too I knew. A bullet clipped the fender. I heard the first man swear as he also went into action. The dark strip of pavement and the low bank beyond seemed a mile wide.

They were both firing as I fell over a wire fence and staggered and stumbled into tall corn.

They ran to the fence, emptying their guns, and only the black night saved me. The shooting stopped, and in a moment I heard their car racing away and I started back to Dan.

Blood on my arm was the first knowledge I had that a bullet had clipped me above the elbow. But that could wait.

Dan was lying by the running board. He mumbled as I dragged him in front of the headlights. His hat had fallen off. His face was white, and a pink froth of blood trembled on his lips as he breathed. Griswold had shot him again as he lay on the ground. He was still dazed from the shock.

Our car was useless and there was no traffic on the highway.

"Whitey," Dan mumbled.

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"Okay, Dan."

"Don't report Griswold."

"Forget him," I said.

"Don't say it was Griswold."

A quarter of an hour passed before headlights raced toward us. Tires shrieked at the last moment and the car came to a skidding weaving halt with the bumper almost against my legs in the middle of the road.

I pointed to Dan. "Get him to a hospital!"

The fat man who stepped out was trembling. He'd thought it was a stickup. His relief was ludicrous. The two women with him helped lift Dan into the back seat. I held Dan's shoulders in that wild ride to the hospital, answering as few of their questions as possible.

Dan was unconscious when he was rushed into the operating room.

My arm was only punctured. Five minutes after an interne taped the bandage on, detectives were questioning me.

"It was a stick-up," I said. "They must have thought Mulvaney was reaching for a gun . . . Recognize them? In the dark like that . . ? Familiar? I wish they were. Would I forget them when that briefcase held twenty-seven thousand dollars!"

They believed me. Dan had no connection with the underworld. We had no reason to protect men who took us for twenty-seven thousand dollars. Even the reporters believed it. But we were put under technical arrest until morning and a detective remained.

DAN'S lung was punctured, a rib broken. Dawn was breaking before they told me he was sleeping. I took the pill an interne gave me—and when I awoke at noon, a nurse said Dan wanted me.

Dan was pale and still against the pillows, and his eyes were questioning.

"Everything all right, Whitey?"

I nodded. "The doctor was just telling me they won't want you more than a week or so."

"No visitors I want to see, Whitey?"

"It's early," I said.

"Don't kid me, Whitey," said Dan, smiling faintly.

Well, I knew too she wasn't coming. And the doctor told me it would be another twenty-four hours before they knew whether Dan would pull through. Twenty-four hours! And they might carry Dan out in a box, and I'd never see that light-hearted grin again because a girl had married a rat.

I had urged Dan to give her a break, and she wouldn't even come to the hospital now. And Griswold was snug and safe with a bankroll again.

I had to go to headquarters and sign a statement; it was three o'clock when I bought another gun and found Griswold's apartment address and taxied there with murder in my mind.

The doorman said the Griswolds had moved a week ago. There was a forwarding address, and the taxi took me to an old brick house in a row of other shabby brick houses.

The landlady who answered my ring was gaunt and suspicious as she told me Griswold was not in. I could ask Mrs. Griswold, second floor, front room.

Mary Griswold opened the door. Her face told me nothing.

"Where can I find your husband?" I asked.

"He's out."

"Working already?"

"Of course," she said calmly. "Driving a taxi."

"That nice new start you wanted and Dan gave you?"

I was thinking of Dan's white face against the pillows and my voice went rough. Mary Griswold stiffened.

"Dan Mulvaney owed me that. Our money paid for his trouble. Now we want to be let alone. We're going to be happy."

She was proud about it, and the makeup couldn't hide the bruise on her cheek.

"Happy?" I said.

"Of course," she said with her chin up.

She carried a newspaper folded at the classified ads. She evidently didn't know Griswold had another bankroll.

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"What cab company is Griswold driving for?" I asked.

"I don't remember." And she was suddenly angry. "I don't know what Dan Mulvaney is trying to do now; but I don't want to hear from him again!"

"You probably won't," I said. "The doctors don't know yet whether he'll come out of this."

Her eyes went wide and the blood left her face. "Dan's in danger?"

"Do you think getting shot by a couple of rats is any picnic?" I said roughly, and walked out of the house before I broke my promise and told her who had shot Dan.

Nobody around town had seen Griswold for a day or so. He wasn't listed at any of the cab companies, and wouldn't be either, I guessed. He had started lamming before I could get to the police with his name.

So I went back to the hospital and looked in Dan's room, and Mary Griswold was sitting by the bed, and Dan was smiling as he held her hand.

"Excuse me," I said, backing out. Dan didn't ask me to stay this time.

I was waiting in the reception room when Mary Griswold came down. Her eyes were wet as I stood up for a showdown.

"Whitey," she said. "Whitey, the doctor thinks Dan is getting stronger. He's going to get well."

"So what?" I said.

"He's not going to die," she said, and the pride wasn't there in her eyes any longer. Something softer and more tender. "I hadn't read the paper when you came," she said with a catch in her voice.

"So what?" I said again.

"I'm going to Reno," said Mary Griswold. "Three days ago I told Harry I was through. I don't know where he is and I don't care. I think he's left town."

She still didn't know about the stick-up. Maybe Dan was right after all. He was a good gambler and the odds were breaking for him.

"Sure," I said. "Congratulations, Mary."

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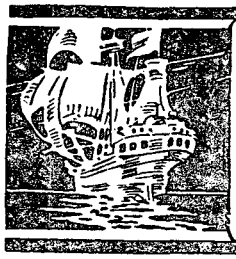

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IN SPITE of the date on this week's cover, the general reindeer-and-mince-pie effect of our holiday cover, and the novelet-gesture in the general direction of the merry gentleman with the fur-trimmed red suit, this is going to be one place in the magazine where the Yule is a Forgotten Season. In fact, right here and now, we declare this corner a Hospice Sacred to All Ye Winded Shoppers and Package-Laden Pedestrians who firmly intend to let out a Loud Scream if anyone so much as hums *Jingle Bells* within earshot.

This is one place where you can come in and sit down and relax. You won't have to plough through swarming aisles of last-minute shoppers all trying to buy Something for Aunt Louise. There will be not one carol and no greeting-card verses. No one putting sofa pillows to uses for which they were not intended in an effort to appear plump and jolly. No mistletoe. No chimneys. And no, for Pete's sake, tinsel.

Not that we are bitter about it. We are not one of those churlish louts who go around hissing at Kris Kringle. It is just that by this time every year a good many people feel they have been having Christmas too long. As capable as any Merry Andrew of enjoying a holiday, they simply haven't got the stamina for the job of turning Christmas into a marathon saturnalia. As far as we are concerned, we feel, sort of, if we can get through the next week by pretending that nothing much is going to happen, by the time the Day comes we will really be up to it. (And *up* to it is the word. Up to it by about five-thirty so that the Boy can go and try out those skis he hasn't had any idea he was going to get ever since the first part of October.)

Christmas is really fine. It is dandy. There's something about the beautifully unreal cardboard angel perched on the top of the tree and the sound of friendly voices ringing out in the frosty winter's air and the spicy breath of juniper needles that comes into the house that's always choked us up just a little, at the proper moment. But you can't drag Christmas out for days and weeks without rubbing just a little of the fine, exciting glitter off it. It should burst upon you—all at once, and not more than one minute before midnight on December 24th.

So pull your chair up nearer to the fire, pour yourself out a cup of good strong tea and join in a rousing chorus of *Lo, Hear the Gentle Lark*—an anthem about as little appropriate as possible to the occasion. And before you charge out, refreshed, for a final bout with floorwalkers, exchange and credit slips, and weary stocking salesladies, pause at the door to get from Hamilcar, Ottokar and Sam your shiny new Merry You-Know-What.

FIRMLY denying that this pouch in our hands is a bundle of toys or goodies or anything indeed but what it is—a bag of unopened letters—we pull out the first, attack it briskly with a paper-cutter (which we got last X—s from someone who obviously hoped we would cut ourselves painfully with it) and read the words of:

ROBERT WALL

I have just finished reading this week's Argonotes with a set purpose in mind. The purpose being that I will send a note in to Argo and see if I can wake him up.

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Argo, in my humble estimation, is a better pixie than Hamilcar or any of your other little men for the simple reason that he has a column of his own. I hope that Ottokar isn't turning green with blue stripes in a frenzy of jealousy as he reads this over your shoulder.

Lately in your column, dear Argo, you have been printing letters about the radio trouble in that mediocre scene in "The Big Wind Blows" (In my estimation the only big wind that was blowing was E. L. Adams and it was a warm wind at that) and I think it is about time that you stop printing such letters, they are getting as tiresome as Leo Lawson Rogers. Otherwise *your column is the tops.*

As to the stories long and short in front of the notes of Argo, I can only say that they are up to par most of the time. Par being an ace in the hole story.

Your best golfers (making my course in par) are Cornell Woolrich, Theodore Roscoe, Richard Sale and W. C. Tuttle if he will give us more Dogieville stories.

Evanston, Ill.

Many thanks, Mr. Wall. But if you think Hamilcar, reading your letter over our shoulder even as you predicted he would, didn't get simply livid at being pushed into a corner like that, you don't know Hamilcar. We're afraid that nothing will appease him now unless we give him a column of his own somewhere. Perhaps the *Big Wind Blows* debate was a little protracted. But having given his critic space in these columns, it seemed only critic to permit Mr. Adams to defend himself. And, finally, a fleet-footed courier has been dispatched to W. C. Tuttle with an earnest plea that Dogieville may boom again.

THE next letter brings up a point that we have been brooding about for a long time, so let's listen to

GEORGE F. CLARKE

I am one of the old guard readers of ARGOSY, having read this magazine boy and man for thirteen years. When you took over this magazine we had a *good one.* But if you call the poor stories you have been printing as progress, I hope we stand still.

All you need is a few more pointless stories and western and *Henry* type of stories to complete the ruination of a wonderful magazine.

I don't expect to see this in Argonotes as it has too many true statements for you, but believe that because of the length of time I have read this magazine I can write you this letter. You should be editing The Ladies Home Journal instead of the ARGOSY when you print stories like "Reader, I Killed Him."

Let's have a story like "The Return of George Washington." There you can brag about doing a real job of editing. And please give us less western stories as the newsstands are filled with this type of magazine.

Jacksonville, Fla.

WE ARE growing just a little restive at the pleas of readers for more Westerns—or less Westerns. Although in Hollywood a "western" is a special kind of motion picture and although through the many specialized fiction magazines, a story of the West has had a sort of fence built around it in readers' minds, the editors of this magazine firmly refuse to make the distinction. We have no program of so many westerns a year—no ambition of printing more, or less, of them than we did last year. A western, to us, is just a story. It stands or falls—as must all our stories—on its merit as entertainment. We never say to ourselves: "Must have a western novelet for the July 11th issue," or "We've got to start a new pseudo-scientific (or costume, or sea, or Oriental) serial by February." We have only two classifications. The good stories. The poor ones. The good ones we print. The poor ones we send back. It's as simple as all that. We would no more think of printing a story just because it was about cowboys and bandits and had horses in it, than we would of not printing one because its hero was a Viking and there'd been too many Swedish characters running through our pages lately. (There *are* so. How about Old Gus and Two-Horse Swen?)

Individual readers may prefer one sort of background to another. That is natural—unavoidable. We're not flouting your dislikes, Mr. Clarke, when we say we can't promise not to publish a story on account of its Western atmosphere. It's simply that there are conceivably as many readers who like the Western scene—and, we hope, a great many more who share our indiffer-

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ence as to a story's geography so long as its quality is high.

HAROLD M. GRELLER

I've just read the concluding chapter of "Tiger on Parade." This story rates the best of all, in my opinion. I somehow wish that it would not end (though I wanted to know the conclusion). "Sandhog" is coming along excellently. As for the rest of the tales, they're all swell! Carry on as you are and you can have my dime every week.

And if you could possibly squeeze in a "Peter The Brazen" story you wouldn't make me mad.

If I'm not asking too much of you, keep up the good work.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

There seems nothing we can add to Mr. Greller's letter, except a word of thanks, and a special Merry Chr———s. And if we're really good and wash behind our ears every night, maybe S——a C. will bring us a whole lot more readers just like him.

Another correspondent who seems almost too good to be entirely real is

RICHARD R. ROSE

The letter by Mr. J. L. Martin in the October 23rd issue started out in a vein along which I have been thinking for many moons. I too have been a reader of the ARGOSY for a long time, since 1909 to be exact, and I'm a bit older than Mr. Martin. In all that time I've had little fault to find with the magazine and I believe it is even better than it used to be.

I require in a magazine (a) entertainment, (b) relaxation and (c) a pleasant feeling of well spent time when the session is completed. To be too critical of the structure of the story is as egotistical as it is foolish and useless. If one can write a better story, why not do so and earn a good fee? These so-called critics who are eager to "burst into print" with an attack on some author's education or literary composition burn me up.

Your magazine's new "suits" are a decided improvement over the old "red band" and if I have any criticism to offer, it would be directed at stories such as "Reader, I Killed Him" and "It's Murder Again." By far the best story you've run in recent years was the "Annapolis Ahoy" football serial. I look forward to more such clean gripping American stories. Smooth Kyle is good, but don't allow your standard to slip too far toward the gangster and "blood and thunder" type. Bear in mind that Young America is an avid reader and that what he reads bears a distinct relation to his future actions and character.

Gary, Indiana.

WE'RE not quite clear about that last point, Mr. Rose. Do you mean that you're afraid Young America will grow up to be just like Smooth Kyle, who certainly is Virtue Triumphant if we ever met him—or that you'd like them to be like Smooth, only a thought less direct in their approach? We've always found Smooth a wholesome influence. On ourselves, we mean. He has given us a whole new knowledge of, as well as awe for, taxi-drivers. And every time we contemplate some mean action like snitching the red ink from the next office we picture Smooth finding out about it and Dealing with Us with his characteristic, untrammeled forcefulness while Gilda stood by and applauded.

JESSE A. HOWLAND

I read with interest your Argonotes each week, and see that your readers have fault to find with one story or another, some have been reading the ARGOSY 10 to 25 years. I have been generally satisfied with all. I started on the first issue of GOLDEN ARGOSY, December 1882, and have always read it in one form or another except on six occasions when I have been away from the United States. Can any reader match this? The newsdealer I first purchased from was George Van Brunt, Ocean Avenue, Sea Bright, N. J.

Is there anyone on your staff that can go back to 1882? How about publishing some of the very fine stories you published in the GOLDEN ARGOSY? There would only be a rare few who could say they were repeats.

May your publication be as good the next 55 years as it has been in the past.

Sea Bright, N. J.

Well, sir, Mr. Howland, you've gone and got us brooding again. After an earnest investigation that covered everyone from Phillpotts who dusts out the coat-closet to Miss Scrogglesworth who's been hanging around for years without so much as the smallest explanation for her presence, we failed to discover anyone that could go to 1882. Some of them wanted to but 1882 would have none of them. And it made us feel a little sad and pretty im-

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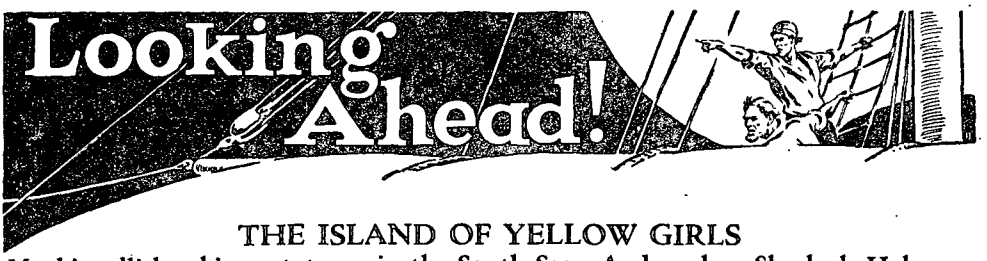
pertinent. Just a bunch of giddy young sprouts dallying eagerly with what must be practically a landmark. And then that made us feel good again—frolicsome and full of the high ideals and vigor of the very young. It was a fine emotional cycle you started, Mr. Howland, and we enjoyed it—as we did your letter—very much indeed.

Again a Merry X—to all.

The following is our office cipher-solver's solution to the puzzle-by-wire given on page 72 of this issue:

Dash home for a period. Pa in comma (coma). *Very acute. Doctor grave. Survival a question.*

Of course if you didn't know about the acute and grave accent marks, you were handicapped. Others who *did* know about the accent marks and got the thing right can feel good if they want to. We don't, because we just this moment received a telegram with plain ordinary English, sans any punctuation at all, on it and it seemed awfully dull.



THE ISLAND OF YELLOW GIRLS

Machiavelli has his prototypes in the South Seas. And so does Sherlock Holmes. There are also scholarly Kanaka Eagle Scouts and castaway normal-school teachers, not to mention lovely little yellow girls who carry .45's and can hold their breath six minutes. But Dave McNally was looking for vaudeville talent, not for riddles. A complete novelet by

RICHARD WORMSER

A SWAP FOR STONEWALL JACKSON

Many a fine and rousing tale has been told of those stirring days when Stuart and Jackson and Sheridan rode, and some of them were true and some were but twisted dreams from old men's minds. True or false, here is one of the best of them—the tale of a fourteen-year-old boy who held off a whole Union army to save the life of Stonewall Jackson. A complete novelet by

RICHARD SALE

THE REEF

As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. **A little boy who built a boat grew up to a life of drudgery. Down on the old pier there was escape. The gleaming waters of the river encompassed another world. And they held, too, the dark Gibraltar that lies in all men's paths. A distinguished short story by**

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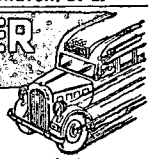

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ATHLETE'S FOOT (Foot Itch)

According to the Government Health Bulletin, No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent On Free Trial

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

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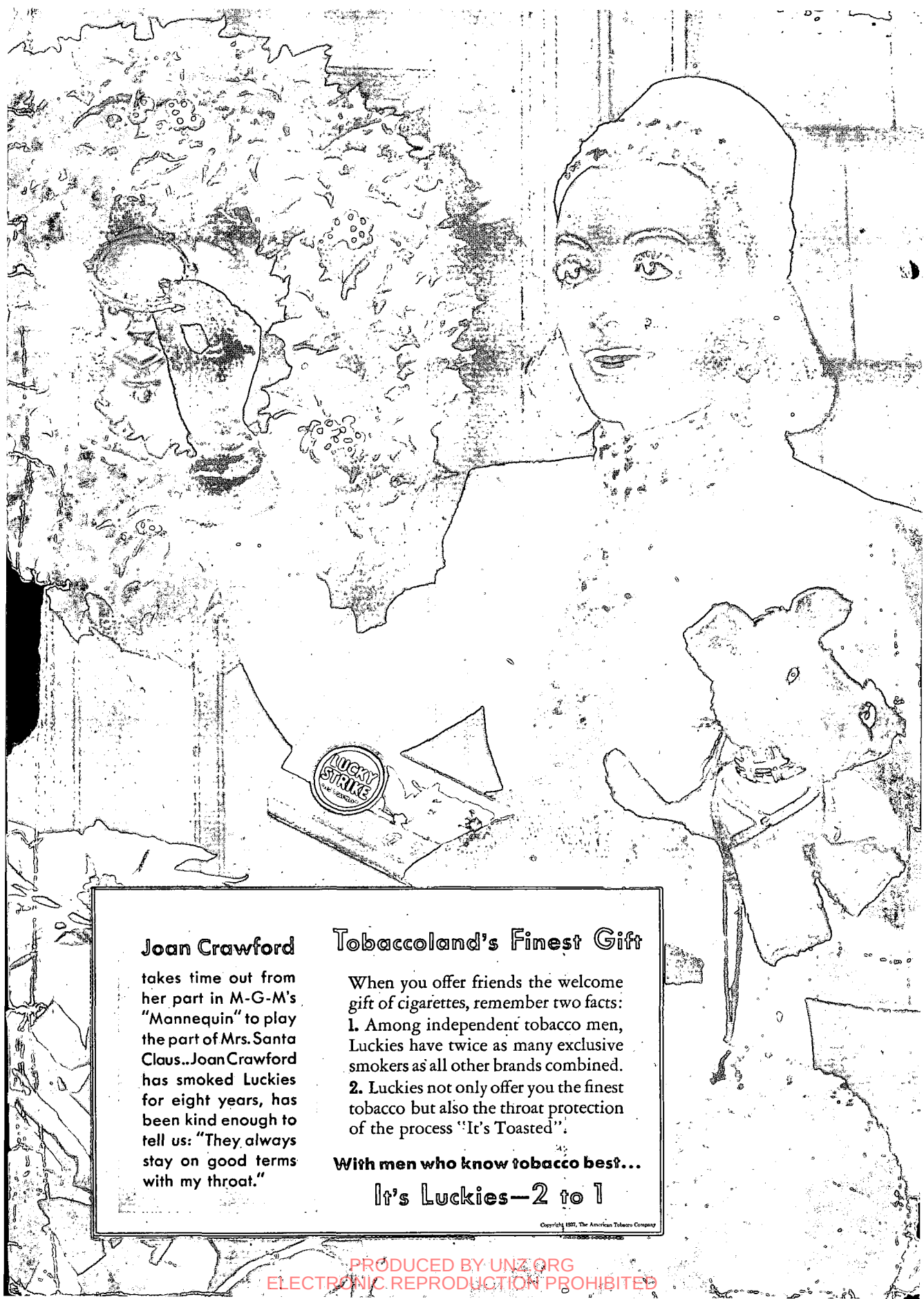

Joan Crawford

takes time out from her part in M-G-M's "Mannequin" to play the part of Mrs. Santa Claus..Joan Crawford has smoked Luckies for eight years, has been kind enough to tell us: "They always stay on good terms with my throat."

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